

寶劍金釵

# Treasured Sword, Golden Hairpin

written by Wang Dulu in 1938-1939

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# Chapter 1

*The old escort guard, with the silver beard and strong arm,*

*Leads a secluded life;*

*The young woman knight, during a balmy spring day,*

*Flies to the aid of her father.*

The province of Hebei, formerly named Zhili, is bounded on the south by the Yellow River, the Huanghe, and on the north by the Yan mountains, the Yanshan; to the east is the immense Bohai Sea, to the west, on several hundred li (1), rise in a continuous chain the mountains of Taixing, the Taixingshan, on which are the oh so famous remains of the Great Wall; the center of this province is only a vast plain. In the middle of it flow important rivers like the Shahe, the Hutuohe, or the Yongdinghe. With this kind of relief, we understand why the kingdoms of Antiquity, like that of Yan or Zhao (2), were able to claim hegemony and fight for their supremacy, and how Beijing could remain the capital for so many years. (3). The inhabitants of this land are simple, they practice filial piety and advocate loyalty. They keep their commitments, value the values of the world of chivalry, and are generally gifted in martial arts (4). The Tang Dynasty poet Han Wengong once said, "Weren't the kingdoms of Yan and Zhao known for their generous great men with tragic fates?" In the heart of the popular markets of this region, fascinating stories are rife, it is a local custom resulting from an ancestral tradition and linked to this particular topography. "Weren't the kingdoms of Yan and Zhao known for their great, generous men with tragic fates?" In the heart of the popular markets of this region, fascinating stories are rife, it is a local custom resulting from an ancestral tradition and linked to this particular topography. "Weren't the kingdoms of Yan and Zhao known for their great, generous men with tragic fates?" In the heart of the popular markets of this region, fascinating stories are rife, it is a local custom resulting from an ancestral tradition and linked to this particular topography.

In the Qing dynasty (5), in the Julu district of Zhili province, lived a knight. This man was over sixty and was named Yu Xiongyuan (6). Since his earliest childhood, he had developed an exceptional skill in the martial arts. At eighteen, he worked as an escort guard all across the country (7). He subdued many despots from the "world of Rivers and Lakes (8)", and performed many righteous and generous acts. Jianghu's men gave him the nickname "Iron Winged Eagle". Over time, people called him only "Old Eagle", which he also did not mind.

In his youth, he offered his escort guard services to the Taixing agency in Beijing. Thanks to him, the Taixing agency grew for more than twenty years and became the most renowned armed escort agency in the capital. At over forty, Yu decided not to depend on anyone anymore and returned home to Julu District, where he opened his own "Xiongyuan" escort agency. He didn't need to employ a lot of guards. When he accepted a mission, all he had to do was display his banner on the vehicles and give his men cards in the name of the agency, so that there would never be the slightest mishap to the convoy, whether or not they traveled long distances. He thus gained the confidence of many itinerant merchants and travelers, and his business was extremely prosperous for the next ten years.

One day, Yu Xiongyuan personally went to Henan, where he stayed for over a month. On his return, he dismissed all the bodyguards and removed the sign from his agency, suspending all activity. From then on, Yu became more courteous and rarely left his home. Those who barely knew him chatted behind his back: they thought the old guard had broken the laws or that his convoy had been ambushed. However, since his activities ceased five or six years earlier, no one had sought him out or demanded compensation, and no officer had come to arrest him. We could only get lost in guesswork.

His beard had grown white, but old guard Yu was still so vigorous. Every day, at dawn, he took his cage of thrushes to the tea house to chat for a while with his friends, then returned home where he remained. The composition of the Yu family was very simple. The old guard only had his wife, née Liu (9), and his daughter, Xiulian (10). They lived in the tiled house he bought.

At that time, people in the city paid less and less attention to the name of Iron Winged Eagle, while no one ignored that of his daughter, Yu Xiulian. Young Yu was indeed very beautiful. Of medium height, she was extremely graceful. Her face was oval, her eyes beautiful and shining. Even without smiling, she offered a radiant face. Her little lips, like cherries, brought out her cheekbones. Her somewhat large feet did not diminish the charm of this sixteen-year-old girl (11).

As she came from an escort guard family, Yu Xiulian was of a rather daring and fearless temperament, which had nothing to do with that of young girls of ordinary literate families, who never left their apartments. Her family never employed a maid. To buy thread or needles, it was always Yu Xiulian who herself went out to call the hawkers and we often saw her virtuous silhouette around the alleys. Young people did not fail to notice her and all succumbed to her charms, which left an unforgettable impression on them. Inevitably, several sons of wealthy local families and many womanizers had vile intentions towards her. But no one dared to approach this flower, for fear of irritating the Old Eagle. Despite the attraction that Xiulian could arouse, the young girl's demeanor remained marked by extreme kindness and it was natural that she avoided looking at men. Every day, apart from the sewing work she did with her mother, she studied kung fu (12) with her father.

One day, during the first lunar month, the disciple of one of the brothers in arms of the old guard, Yu Tianjie, nicknamed "Golden Darts", arriving from the government of Zhangde (13), in Henan, came to present his greetings to him for a happy new year. He stayed at his house for a few days and the two men spent a lot of time talking. After Yu Tianjie left, old Yu (14) seemed very concerned, but made no hint. In the evening, he carefully closed the door, and made the following recommendations to his wife and daughter:

"From now on, if there is a knock on the door, do not open the door and come and warn me first!"

"Dad," Xiulian said to him very surprised, "why take so many precautions?"

"You're a girl," he answered concerned, "don't ask too many questions!"

Her father had never spoken to her so firmly before and she dared not insist.

The old guard retrieved his steel saber from the wall, which jingled as he unhooked it. Deep blue-green, this blade had served him for more than twenty years and had shed the blood of several scoundrels. He hadn't used it for many years, and when he weighed it it felt heavy. He sighed deeply and heard himself say, "I'm old after all, I can't play hero anymore!" He thought then, "I had a child at fifty, a daughter. I'm teaching her martial arts, but it won't help. If only Xiulian were a boy, I wouldn't be so tormented." He then felt as though he had come to the end of his life and, disillusioned, couldn't help but sigh again.

His wife had spent half of her life by his side. She had repeatedly observed her husband laughing to himself or sighing continuously; so she did not worry about this behavior. Xiulian was not used to seeing her father so desperate and saddened. Seeing that his mother, as usual sewing by the light of the lamp, did not ask him any questions about his torments, Xiulian let out a few tears. Without daring to inquire with her father, the young girl intuitively understood the situation. He had an enemy who sought revenge. Yu Tianjie's visit was not really meant to greet him, but rather to warn him of this imminent arrival; and it was for this reason that he was now on his guard.

Young Xiulian was insightful, and that night, as she expected, her father slept very badly, his sword resting next to the pillow. Late that night, she could still hear him sigh. The next day, at dawn, he brandished his saber in the courtyard, as if he wanted to practice.

Xiulian observed the scene through her bedroom window while applying makeup. She only heard the sound of the blade cutting through the air. A cold light accompanied the swirling body of the old guard. What a superb saber technique! Less than a quarter of an hour later, he stopped. His face was red and dripping with sweat. The old guard was panting and his breath ruffled his white beard. Tears gushed out of Xiulian's eyes. In the mirror, seeing her mother

come into the room, she immediately wiped her face and put on blush.

That morning the old guard did not come to the tea house. The thrushes, hanging from the awning, kept squealing, but Yu pretended he couldn't hear them. With his hands behind his back, he paced back and forth in the courtyard, preoccupied. His attitude was most surprising; if he heard a noise at the front door, he would arm himself with his sword, then go to open it. That day, Xiulian did not put on her usual clothes with wide sleeves, but preferred her black ensemble, suitable for practicing martial arts. She was constantly raising her head and staring at the pair of swords hanging from her bedroom wall. "Papa won't have to move," she said to herself, "if his enemy comes, I'll take care of him; he will know then that he did not teach me his kung fu for nothing!"

Father and daughter remained on their guard for ten days, but no incident happened and no one came to challenge old Yu. Young Xiulian was reassured and thought to herself that maybe her father was exaggerating the situation. The old guard also finally calmed down, and resumed his old habits, taking his cage of thrushes to the tea house at dawn, chatting and joking with his wife and daughter.

More than a month passed and it was the Qingming Festival (15). As was customary, everyone went to the graves of ancestors to burn false paper money and meditate there. Old guard Yu begged a former employee, who once served under him, to guard the house. He answered to the name of Cui San, "the Cunning of the Underground". He then hired the services of a carter. The young girl and her mother took their places in the mule cart and the old guard sat on top of the stretcher. The cart got out of the alley and walked along the busy main street towards the North Gate. Passers-by, seeing the imitations of paper money and gold ingots to be burned hanging from the vehicle, called out to old Yu:

"Old Uncle Yu (16), are you going to meditate at the graves?"

"Eh yes!" He nodded, smiling.

At the same time, passers-by inevitably tried to look inside the cart. The lovely Yu Xiulian, dressed in pale red clothes, like a peach

blossom open in the third month, was sitting there.

The north gate passed, they followed the rut and headed west. The tombs of the ancestors of the Yu family were about sixteen li to the northwest. The journey would therefore take some time. At this time of year the green shoots of wheat spread across the countryside; the peach blossoms on the edge of the cottages revealed themselves like blooming faces; little yellow and white butterflies fluttered among the wild flowers, and the gentle west wind caressed faces and hands. From the cart, the young Xiulian exclaimed in a charming voice:

"Daddy, look! These wheat shoots are so tall...!"

"Indeed! Of course, this year the harvest will be good!" He replied softly.

As they talked, the old guard's gaze lingered on the countless graves clustered next to each other between the wheat fields. On some, ashes of paper money still smoked, beside others sobbed the bereaved relatives. Old Yu stroked his white beard agitated by the spring breeze and felt an indescribable moment of bewilderment. Realizing that he was over sixty, he feared he could only live a few more years before lying underground for his last sleep. Young Xiulian was in a different state of mind. She was overflowing with joy in front of these young green weeping willows, these barely blooming peach blossoms and these abundant wild grasses. Dame Yu, sitting at the back of the vehicle, was not looking at anything,

The cart arrived at the cemetery in the afternoon. For generations, the Yu family had subsisted on martial arts and had never had a famous person; therefore, the cemetery did not display any tombstones or trees. Xiulian and her mother got out of the cart and the old guard led them to each grave where, prostrating themselves with their heads on the ground (17), they burned the paper money. Then the family went to the cemetery keeper to rest for a while, drink some tea and have a quick snack before making their way home.

The cart had just passed five or six li. In the distance, the watchtower of the northern gate of the Julu district was already

appearing, when suddenly four horses charged in front of them. The first rider, mounted on a black horse, was hardly more than twenty years old. He had big eyes and a purplish face. Arriving in front of the cart, he yelled:

"Get off!"

Old Yu turned pale. The four horsemen dismounted and unsheathed shining steel sabers. The crimson-faced man addressed the old guard with an icy smile:

"Today, my father's revenge will finally be fulfilled!"

The four men approached to force old Yu out of the cart. He had not planned to find himself confronted with such a situation. He simply accompanied his wife and daughter, without a weapon in hand; what to do? He was about to speak to them, when Xiulian appeared from inside the cart.

"Stop!" she shouted at them. "What do you want?"

"Hey! But your daughter is not bad," laughed the attackers on seeing her.

"Back off," the old guard said indignantly, protecting Xiulian. "I'm going to slay you right now!"

The four individuals did not see it that way. One of them, light-skinned, swung in the direction of old Yu. Young Xiulian jumped out of the cart and swiftly snatched his sword from him. She waved it nimbly and spun it around, forcing them to back away.

"Xiulian!" her father shouted at her. "Hurry up and give me that sword!"

The three still armed individuals prevented Xiulian from giving it to him. They brandished their blades together to stop her. The young girl twirled the saber several times and slashed it down in the back of the larger one, who let out an "Aiyo!" Before collapsing to the ground. Xiulian faced the other two as old Yu leapt up and grabbed the wounded man's weapon.



"Xiulian, fall back!" He shouted at her, rushing at the two men.

But the young girl's sharp blade, dancing in the air with cold light, was already attacking the crimson-faced man; for her, there was no question of going back!

Old Yu came to blows with a young man with a black beard who, being no match, quickly turned around and fled. The crimson-faced man found himself alone and deployed all his strength against the father and daughter. Although he excelled in martial arts, it would have been difficult for him to win. Many passers-by had gathered on the side of the path and cried out in unison:

"Hey there, hey there! If you continue like this, you will cause someone's death!"

But the lights of the swirling sabers made their heads spin, and no one dared approach to calm them down.

After a dozen exchanges between the three blades, a young boy suddenly emerged from the crowd, a sword in his hand.

"Stop and explain yourself!" He exclaimed, separating the closely touching sabers.

The crimson-skinned man seemed delighted with this intervention and took the opportunity to take a few steps back and catch his breath. His face looked like a scorched eggplant, both black and crimson red. The driver of the cart then stuck his head out of the car. Lady Yu kept shaking. The other two men, who had fled, returned to help their companion injured by Xiulian.

At that moment, the twenty to thirty passers-by came forward together. One of them, who recognized old guard Yu, said:

"Uncle Yu and the girl are in trouble!"

"Let's tie up these bandits," cried another, "and deliver them to the authorities!" "

Old Yu, while thanking this crowd of passers-by with folded hands, declared to them:

"Don't do anything! They are not thieves but men who seek revenge. We must untie the knots of hatred, not tighten them. If they don't want to go to court, let them go!"

The three men, supporting the wounded man, grabbed the two sabers they had left and recovered their horses. Without uttering a single word, they slipped north.

Some passers-by only glanced at Yu Xiulian and then walked on. Others questioned old Yu about the enmity that bound him to these men or praised the young woman's dexterity. The young man with the sword, who had just appeased the fight, also asked old Yu the reasons for this confrontation.

"I have been an escort guard and have traveled Jianghu for half of my life," he explained to him. I inevitably made enemies, that's the reason for this clash. Fortunately, Your Excellency intervened; otherwise it would certainly have ended badly! We could have gone to the authorities, but I'm old now, and I prefer to have as little fuss as possible!"

Yu Xiongyuan begged his daughter to thank the passers-by. She clasped her hands at chest level and waved to the crowd, before getting into the cart. Old Yu bowed down in his turn, his hands clasped, then stepped over the stretcher. The carter waved his whip and they set off again. Passers-by, as well as the young man, also continued on their way.

Old Yu's cart entered the city and finally arrived in front of the house. Yu Xiongyuan begged his daughter to help her mother get out of the vehicle and opened the door. He paid for the trip and went home, the two swords they had stolen in hand.

"My old uncle is back!" Cui San exclaimed.

"Yes, I was a bit long," said old Yu. "You can go, in a moment, you will tell Sun Zhengli to come."

Cui San nodded and left, glancing at the swords the old man was holding.

Old Yu carefully closed the door, wedging it with a large stone, and went to his rooms. Young Xiulian hastened to serve him tea. Dame Yu asked him the end of this story and the reason for such violence on the part of these four strangers. The old guard exhaled a long sigh:

"Let me breathe a moment."

Old Yu put down the two weapons at the corner of the room and sat down, taking a deep breath. Xiulian was eager to learn more about these individuals. She handed him a bowl of tea and said:

"Drink your tea, daddy!"

Old Yu took the bowl and took a sip.

"Lucky you were with me today," he finally told her, looking at her. "Otherwise, I would certainly have had a tragic end!"

With this praise, Xiulian suddenly realized the extent of the danger and tears began to roll down her cheeks. Old Yu had never cried, but there he let out a few tears and sighed.

"Six years ago, I took a trip to Henan," he told her. At that time, you were already eleven years old, maybe you remember? When I got back, I closed the escort agency and never took on any more assignments. The deep hatred of these men towards me dates from that time!"

His tears redoubled, like a fountain, and in a miserable voice he said:

"You have an uncle named He..."

As he spoke, he wiped away the tears of his wife, who was leaning on the table.

"Your mother knows who I'm talking about. His name is He Feilong (18), nicknamed He with Precious Sabers. Young, we were inseparable. At the time, we were both working as an escort guard. I belonged to the Taixing agency, he to the Bao'an agency. In our free time, we would drink and chat together. We were like brothers.

He excelled in martial arts and had a good character, but he was too fond of chasing women, always ready to seduce young girls from good families. I kept warning him, but he never listened to me. One day, out of jealousy, he quarreled with a rival and he stabbed him. With thirty liang of silver (19) that I had on hand, I helped him to escape to Henan. I heard that there, after having been a thief for several years, he had made a fortune, we do not know quite how. He then changed his name to He Wenliang. He had become a wealthy landowner in the Weihui government, got married and had children. But we never gave each other any news. Six years ago, I accepted an assignment to bring candidate Hu to his new post in Henan. He had passed the imperial exams in the Xinhe district and thus obtained a magistrate's place in the Wuzhi district in Henan. So I sent two men on my behalf to protect and lead candidate Hu and his wife. Who would have thought that as they passed through Weihui's government, thieves hiding in the mountains, in cahoots with He Feilong, would attack the convoy? They did not steal money or property, but kidnapped the candidate's young wife, who was turning twenty. She was taken to a mountain temple where she stayed for three days before being finally released. Upon their return, my partners informed me of what had happened. This angered me deeply and I personally went to the Weihui government to look for He Feilong. I could have reminded him of our old friendship, but angrily I called him to account. Against all expectations, he reacted violently. We then came to blows and I killed him with a stab!"

Old Yu felt very sad. Captivated, his daughter listened to him attentively. Dame Yu thought back to their first meeting with He Feilong, when she and her husband still lived in Beijing forty years earlier. He Feilong was barely twenty, she thought. Big eyes, pale complexion, he was still dressed in silk clothes. He called me sister-in-law and continuously hung out with Yu Xiongyuan. After committing this act, he fled who knows where in Henan. He would be in his sixties now, if Yu Xiongyuan hadn't caused his death five or six years ago.

The old guard continued his story:

"After He Feilong was stabbed, his family did not dare to press

charges, considering a settling of scores linked to a story of robbery. She also didn't want the humiliation of candidate Hu's young wife to be leaked out and settled the case in private. No one knew about the story except Yu Tianjie and a few guards who knew the details, since they had been part of the convoy. I returned from Henan completely devastated. On the one hand, because my convoy was attacked. Few people knew it, but I was going to lose face by leaving the escort agency open. On the other hand, He Feilong had been my friend for a long time, and although he had committed acts which Heaven disapproves of or even reacted violently to my coming, it was I who had killed him with my own hands. I really felt miserable. I decided to close the escort agency and even stopped venturing into Jianghu.

"I had forgotten this story when, two months ago, Yu Tianjie came to greet me for the New Year and told me without preamble about He Feilong's two sons."One is called He Sanhu (20), nicknamed 'Iron Pagoda', the other He Qihu (21), called 'Phantom with the purple face', he announced to me. There is also his daughter He Jian'e (22), nicknamed 'the Demoness' and her husband Zhang Yujin, 'the Golden Spear'. In recent years, they have all immersed themselves in the practice of martial arts and reached a surprising level. They can now aspire for revenge for their father. They announce to whoever wants to hear it that, in three months, they will be in Julu to kill you! " After Yu Tianjie left, I therefore prepared for their coming. Since nothing was happening, I relaxed my vigilance. Who would have thought I would run into them when I visited the cemetery?"

After this explanation of the He family's hatred of him, Xiulian comforted him:

"There is no more need to worry now. Earlier, they fled and we saw that they were not that strong! They were afraid of us, henceforth they will not dare to come and provoke you!"

"Those are the words of a child," resumed old Yu."Among the men who blocked the road were undoubtedly the two children of He Feilong. I don't care about them, the one that worries me the most is this Zhang Yujin."

"What is it worth?" she hastened to ask.

"I have never met him, but in recent years I have heard that he is extremely talented in martial arts and that his spear has never met an opponent to match him. He must be in his thirties now and I didn't know he married He Feilong's daughter. According to Yu Tianjie, this Zhang Yujin hates me and accuses me of being a disloyal man! Sooner or later he will come and get me to avenge his stepfather."

The lovely face of the young girl darkened with anger and she sneered:

"Do not worry. Let him come, this Zhang Yujin, I will take care of him! Whether he or others come, I won't let them touch even a hair of your beard!"

A smile spread over old Yu's face. Usually he didn't pay attention to the kung fu practiced by young girls. For him, however perfect their mastery of the technique of the saber or the art of boxing, they could not fight against the size and the strength of a man. Today, however, he had seen Xiulian grab a sword with her bare hands and face four brutes, even slaying one of them. This subtle skill, skillful handling of the sword and her courage in combat exceeded anything he could hope for. The birth of a girl could well be worth that of a boy, and he was comforted to see his daughter so reckless and enthusiastic.

"Alright," he agreed. "I don't worry anymore. Either way, they are determined to take revenge and wherever I go they will hunt me down. For now, we still live here, so we must remain vigilant. We will see what tricks they use to stand up to me. If Zhang Yujin shows up, the two of us will surely be able to put him to flight."

Xiulian was happy to see her father reassured and they discussed something else, while Lady Yu busied herself with preparing the meal.

After dinner, Cui San returned with Sun Zhengli. About thirty years old, of tall stature, the latter had an astonishing physical strength. As his boxing was just as strong (23), people had given him the

nickname "Eagle of the Five Talons". Sun Zhengli had also been employed by Yu Xiongyuan and had always been very dedicated. Old Yu often advised him in his martial arts practice, which is why Sun Zhengli used to call him a master. The Eagle of the Five Talons taught boxing in town, to the wealthy Liu family. That evening, Cui San unexpectedly came to find him because Master Yu begged him to come. Once finished, Sun Zhengli therefore followed him to the old guard.

After such a day, the old guard could no longer hide his secret and spoke again about the sons of He Feilong and this Zhang Yujin. He finally said to him:

"I'm old now. My mind and my strength are dwindling. Although Xiulian defends herself in kung fu, she remains a girl. Besides, she has been engaged for a long time already and if anything happened to her, I would lose face towards my son-in-law's family. That's why I asked you to come and ask for your help.

"Do not be worried, Master," replied Sun Zhengli, hitting his chest, "you can count on me! I only have two disciples at the Liu Family, and their training is completed, I have nothing more to do. From today, I am settling here. If a few thoughtless youngsters from Jianghu showed up, the master and his young daughter would not have to deal with them; I would make them run away by giving them a scare!"

Old Yu knew that Sun Zhengli was not a boast. In recent years, through his assiduous training, he had indeed reached a good level.

"Good," he nodded. "With Cui San, bring your mats and blankets, I will put you both in the rooms in the outer courtyard."

The old guard moved them into the two rooms in the west wing. Every day, apart from the time spent teaching with the Liu, Sun Zhengli stayed with the master and spent his time polishing his steel sword. Each night he made several rounds, going through all the courtyards and visiting all the rooms. It was like this for several days, but nothing abnormal happened.

## Chapter 2

*The pretty girl from modest family*

*Surprises the whole city;*

*The insolent disciple caught in a whim*

*Sneaks into the house in the middle of the night.*

Just two days after the incident, the news that young Yu Xiulian saved her father by facing four brutes, snatching one of their swords with her bare hands, was already spreading throughout Julu District and people exclaimed, "Young Yu's kung fu surpasses her father's!" It must be impressive!"

The young men, who were usually drawn to Xiulian's beauty, were utterly devastated by this news." All is lost! If at least this young girl was tender, they thought, there would still be hope of approaching her. But she's actually so terrible: putting four armed men to flight all by herself! Who would still dare to flirt with her? She could kill us by touching us with her little finger! From then on, Julu's men continued to admire Xiulian, but feared the girl's kung fu. They were very careful that their gaze was not too insistent, lest she corrected them sharply.

Four days passed. In the early afternoon, the peddler's tambourine sounded in the alley, and young Xiulian remembered that she needed thread to finish her embroidered shoes. With a bound, she went to open the front door and called the peddler. The old man of about fifty, carrying a wooden crate on his back, turned around, his tambourine in his hand. He asked her what she wanted while placing his trunk on the stone step of the threshold of the house. As Xiulian leaned outside to choose, a man called out to her:

" Young lady!" he said to her.

Xiulian looked up and saw a man in his thirties, pale complexion, with thick eyebrows. He had a large mole on the right side of his face. He was wearing a black crepe lined jacket and a pair of black



satin boots. He greeted her very respectfully.

"Excuse me," he said with a smile, "is my Uncle Yu here?" "

He didn't seem unfamiliar to her, but Xiulian couldn't remember where she had seen him. His face flushed immediately. She turned around inside the house and called out, "Big brother Cui San! Big brother Cui San! She didn't answer the young man and tried not to stare at him. After selecting red and green thread, she paid the merchant and re-entered the courtyard.

Cui San appeared at the door.

"Who are you looking for?" He called out.

The stranger greeted him with folded hands, eyeing the pretty figure entering the courtyard.

"I'm coming to see my uncle Yu," he replied, "can you go tell him?"

"From who?" continued Cui San, who found his attitude unsuitable. "You tell me to warn him, but first I would like to know why you are asking!"

"My name is Liang," he replied, clasping his hands once again, "I live in Taidehe, to the east. Uncle Yu has already met me."

Cui San was still on the doorstep when old Yu appeared, sword in hand.

"Uncle Yu!" Exclaimed the young man, hastening to greet him respectfully, bowing his hands together.

The old guard stared at him for a moment before finally recognizing him. It was the passer-by who had intervened during the confrontation and had ended the fight. The old guard smiled at him and promptly led him into the west wing of the outer courtyard (24).

Old Yu introduced him to Sun Zhengli who was already in the room.

"This is my disciple, Sun Zhengli. And you, young man, what's your name?"

"My name is Liang Wenjin," he answered while greeting Sun Zhengli, "my family opened the grain store in Taidehe, in the east of the city."

"So it's the master of the Liang family who comes to pay me respects," appreciated the old guard. "The other day, luckily you intervened, otherwise we would probably have hurt this man."

Old Yu put his sword against the wall and begged Cui San to serve the tea.

"Your humble nephew is from Nangong District," Liang Wenjin continued. "My family trades in Julu and I come here regularly for entertainment. The other day, I was coming back from a visit to a friend who lives out of town, when I ran into my uncle fighting with these people. At your side, the young lady was helping you. I've been watching you for quite a while; you and your daughter have the most expert saber technique and I was full of admiration. I thought if you killed one of these men you would inevitably have to deal with the law, so I intervened. Yesterday evening, I was already thinking of coming to see you, but a case held me back. So today I'm coming to visit you and see if you and your daughter were home."

"Thank you for this attention," replied Yu Xiongyuan. "It has been almost ten years since I left the world of Rivers and Lakes and I do not come into conflict with people lightly. The crash the other day was really the most unexpected, and I still don't understand why these men were mad at me! Thinking about it, I thought to myself that maybe in the past I inadvertently wronged them. They would then come and make me pay for it!"

"My uncle was a famous hero of Jianghu," replied Liang Wenjin. "In the past, all over the world, you were known to be a lover of righteousness and for your disinterest in riches. Of course, you inevitably had to make some enemies. Now that they know you are old, they come to brutalize you. Only they don't expect that, despite your great age, you will be as heroic as before and your daughter's

kung fu will be so exceptional. From now on they know it and no one will dare to come and provoke you!"

"I'm not sure," replied old Yu.

"Don't worry. I practice a little martial arts myself, if in the future someone still provokes you, let me know. No, better, I can come see you every day! No matter how many assailants there are, you won't have to move, old uncle. Between us, the younger sister and I would have no trouble beating these bandits!"

Old guard Yu didn't deign to respond to the young man who overestimated himself so and simply nodded. Sun Zhengli found the young man loathsome and thought to throw him out. It was then that Liang Wenjin straightened up and asked old Yu to lead him to his wife to pay her respects. Faced with this request, the old guard, losing patience, replied curtly:

"She is sick and does not want to see anyone. Excuse me, I won't let you in!"

The young man noticed the dissatisfaction of the master and realized that Sun Zhengli, looking very angry, was staring at him with wide eyes. The young man did not dare to linger any longer and straightened up to take his leave. The old guard accompanied him to the entrance. The young man took one last glance at the inner courtyard before stepping out. Sun Zhengli followed suit and growled, clenching his fist:

"What does it mean!"

Liang Wenjin didn't even dare to turn his head and slipped out into the alley. Sun Zhengli closed the door and walked back into the room.

"Master, don't worry about this man," he said. "I feel that he did not come here with good intentions!"

"Let's forget about it and talk about it no more," replied old Yu with a wave of his hand. "I know him, he's the young master of the Taidehe grain store. His wealthy family is well known in the

Nangong district. The young masters of the Liang clan all know a little bit about martial arts, but don't get too involved in family matters. I understood that if he came today, it was for Xiulian. I don't want to get angry with him. At the time of the escort agency, we had contact with his family."

Having thus concluded, old Yu walked to the inner courtyard.

Sun Zhengli was furious. "With age, the teacher has changed a lot," he said to himself. "He no longer attaches the slightest importance to any business and no longer gets carried away. The other day, He Feilong's sons attacked him and wanted to kill him. His daughter helped him fight them, slaying one of them. He should have had them arrested and accused them of attacking him in order to loot him. But no, he didn't even get angry and let them go. Now he lives in anguish and asks me to keep his house! And there again, this young Liang comes to his house, takes liberties with his daughter and he still does not get angry. But where has his temper of the last twenty years gone? It is hard to believe that the one called "Iron Winged Eagle" in the past in Jianghu has become so weak!" At the height of indignation, he had gotten to the point of wishing he would get into trouble just to see how he would react. Angry for a moment, Sun Zhengli left for his boxing instruction.

After dinner he returned to the master. Cui San called out to him:

"Big Brother Sun, I have something to tell you. A little while ago, the young master of Taidehe returned."

"What else did he want?" he hastened to ask.

"He didn't come in. He was just pacing up and down the alley, his eyes never leaving our door. I saw him afterwards hanging out in the main street with two other young lords, strolling and chatting. They then returned to the Qingji Tavern."

"Didn't you hear what they were saying to each other?"

"I got right behind them," Cui San chuckled, "and I heard this Liang Wenjin very distinctly say, 'If I don't get the Yu girl, I will never set foot in Julu District again!'"

"This guy finally has some ideas," grumbled Sun Zhengli. "Ha ha! We're not going to tell him that young Yu is already engaged; he must know that the people of Julu do not allow themselves to be intimidated so easily!"

"He is not entirely at fault," replied Cui San, "our young mistress is also looking for trouble. All young women are taught to stay at home. Xiulian goes out on the streets three to four times a day. With her elegance and colorful clothes, she inevitably catches the eye of young people with bad intentions! Ask a little in town, everyone knows that our young mistress is known for her beauty. But the old master cherishes her so much that he lets her do what she wants!"

"You're not there! I find the young mistress very worthy. If she goes out to buy thread or needles, it is because she cannot do otherwise since she does not have a servant. And if she has become so pretty, she has nothing to do with it! Should she cut off the tip of her nose to keep all these scoundrels away? Anyway," he growled, "better not for one of them to cross my path!"

Cui San had taken out a bottle of alcohol which he drank in small sips, while eating peanuts which he had in his pockets. Sun Zhengli was irascible. He had already spent several days with the master and nothing had happened. Unable to display his art, his feet and fists itched.

In the evening, as he was polishing his sword in the light of the lamp and half drunk Cui San was dozing lying on the kang (25), old Yu came to chat with him in the room.

In recent years, Sun Zhengli had heard of the fame of many brave people in Jianghu. In Beijing, there was Qiu Guangchao, nicknamed "the General with the Silver Lance", as well as Huang Jibei who did business far beyond the Great Wall and who was nicknamed the "Lean Buddha Amida (26)". He had also heard of Miao Zhenshan, "the Fish that swallows the Boats (27)" of Henan and again of Feng Mao at the "Golden Sabers" of Shen Prefecture. They were the current heroes of the Rivers and Lakes world and Sun Zhengli hoped to meet them all one day.

In the old days, when Yu Xiongyuan heard about a famous Jianghu knight, he carefully inquired about him. Most of the time, he would set out to meet him and challenge him to martial arts. That evening, he listened to Sun Zhengli without much interest, wiggling his beard and smiling slightly, as if he even somewhat disdained these men. Sun Zhengli then began to relate the exploits of the old days of the old guard, hoping to restore him to his legendary resentment. But the latter, still smiling, exclaimed:

"I was really unconscious! Fortunately I have always been lucky, otherwise it would be over long ago! Okay," he said, hearing the third watch ringing (28), "let's close the door and go get some rest!"

Sun Zhengli was furious but accompanied the old master. The latter made a detailed round of the house again, as if he feared that a thief had hidden himself in a corner. Sun Zhengli found him somewhat pitiful. "You should never get old," he said to himself with a sigh. Because his beard has grown white, he has come to this, worrying about everything; such a great hero, the famous Iron Winged Eagle! After carefully inspecting the outer courtyard, reassured old Yu walked to the inner courtyard.

Sun Zhengli entered the bedroom. He was upset. In the past few days, nothing had happened and he felt like the old guard was playing a trick on him. Basically, no one had come forward. He fell asleep resigned.

Not knowing how long he had dozed off, an abnormal noise woke him with a start. People walked on the tiles, they fought on the roof and swords clashed. Sun Zhengli jumped out of bed and groped for his sword. As he opened the door, he heard someone fall from the roof.

"Who's there?" He exclaimed.

The shadow didn't answer but straightened up and brandished his weapon in his direction. From above, young Xiulian exclaimed:

"Big Brother Sun, step aside and leave him to me!"

With her two sabers, she jumped and leaped at the individual. Sun

Zhengli did the same. After ten exchanges, the man was already unable to ward off and found himself cornered:

"Stop," he cried. "I admit defeat!"

"What do you mean stop," grumbled Sun Zhengli. "Today, your dirty dog life is over!"

He was about to hit him when someone from behind grabbed his arm.

"Zhengli," said old Yu, "don't hurt him!"

At that moment, Cui San came out of his room with a lantern and illuminated the courtyard. At the foot of the wall appeared a young man holding a sword, terrified. Sun Zhengli immediately recognized Liang Wenjin, who had come the same day.

"Ah! But it is this rich lord Liang from Nangong," he said. "Are you here to steal from us? Quickly let go of your sword!"

Liang Wenjin threw his weapon, which clicked as it fell to the ground. Sun Zhengli stepped forward. Armed with a handful of cattail leaves, he whipped him several times in the face. Liang Wenjin's face swelled, blood flowed from his nose, but he didn't react.

Old Yu, though very angry, reflected, "In Nangong, the Liang clan is very influential; this family has opened businesses all over the place and has good relations with many escort agencies. If we hurt him, we are sure to make enemies of him and have endless problems. Moreover, if he broke into my home in the middle of the night, it was either to steal from me or because he had bad intentions towards my daughter. His family is rich, I can't believe he came to steal something; what will he say to that?"

Old Yu handed his weapon to Cui San and asked Xiulian to go inside. He pushed Sun Zhengli aside and walked over to the boy:

"Young Master, why are you entering my house in the middle of the night, sword in hand; what are your intentions?"

Liang Wenjin lowered his head and preferred not to answer. Exasperated, old Yu exclaimed:

"You young people, after a few lessons in kung fu, you dare to behave like this. So you don't think. What could a rascal like you do in the clutches of the Iron Winged Eagle? If I didn't think the men in the Liang family are respectable merchants, I would have killed you already. Come on, get the hell out of here!"

He then slapped Liang Wenjin, hitting him much harder than Sun Zhengli, and the young man nearly passed out. Old Yu told Cui San to go open the entrance. Sun Zhengli pulled the young man by the ear and kicked him out. He closed the door.

Liang Wenjin stayed on the ground for a while before getting up. His face was tugging at him as if it had been cut off. He felt it and felt it all swollen and sticky. Son of a wealthy Nangong family, Liang Wenjin was a xiucai (29) and also learned martial arts. He considered himself an elegant son of a powerful family, a master in the art of the pen and the sword. He had come to Julu accompanied by his maternal uncle Mou Zichun and his comrade Xi Zhongxiao, to check the store accounts, but also to have a little fun. He never expected to meet Yu Xiulian, this young girl who fascinated him so much now. He especially admired her kung fu and hoped to be able to compete with her. He was convinced that with his level he could arouse the admiration of Xiulian and thus obtain this young beauty. During the day, he had therefore visited old Yu, seeking to get to know each other so that he could then frequently visit them. He didn't expect the old guard to treat him so coldly.

Liang Wenjin then contained his anger and said to himself, "I am not just anybody, my family is rich and influential, I will never stoop to licking someone's boots to get a girl." You are just an old escort guard, your daughter is not too bad and has some martial arts skills, but who do you think you are? You'll see, I'll seduce your daughter! With his shenanigans going to his head, Mou Zichun and Xi Zhongxiao frankly laughed at him while they were at the tavern. His uncle Mou Zichun knew very well that Yu Xiongyuan was not a simple person and that his nephew was no match for him. Xi Zhongxiao was also the son of a wealthy Nangong family. Notorious womanizer, he was always ahead of Liang Wenjin. But, as far as the



Old Eagle's daughter was concerned, he didn't even dare to think about it for a second. He knew for a fact that she was such a rose, beautiful, fragrant, but full of thorns, and really didn't think Liang Wenjin could take hold of her.

Who would have imagined that Wenjin would have the audacity to go to the Yu's in the middle of the night? He had planned to steal one or two of the girl's personal items there and come back to brag about it to his two companions. Only, no sooner had he climbed onto the roof when he was spotted by Xiulian, who suddenly joined him and began the fight. Faced with the young girl's sabers, he could only parry the blows. Xiulian cut him down with a flick of his leg and he fell from the roof. It is at this moment that Sun Zhengli appears. He refused the fight, took a few slaps and received a kick that knocked him out of the house. At that precise moment, he would have liked to kill himself: "How could I come home like this?" he says to him. Tomorrow my face will be even more swollen and I will be disfigured. But I really have no other choice, I have to go back to the store."

The night was deep, there was not a cat around. Liang Wenjin was leaving the alley where the Yu lived when he saw men approaching with lanterns. He wanted to avoid them, but they were already running to meet him. One of them raised his lantern which lit up Wenjin's face; he burst out laughing and addressed the others:

"I told you we would find the young master over here! He who runs in love, he has now displayed it all over his face!" The one who spoke thus was none other than Xi Zhongxiao. Wounded in his self-esteem, Wenjin instantly punched him.

"Bastard," he exclaimed, "you dare to make fun of a Liang? From now on, I don't know you anymore!"

Mou Zichun and a few other companions hastened to reason with him:

"You're drunk and you hurt yourself falling! Everyone is looking for you and you get angry with him!"

But from Liang Wenjin's mouth only nonsense came.

"You insult me but I won't reply," Xi Zhongxiao said contemptuously. "Just wait until tomorrow when I go see your father..."

In the middle of the night, they bickered over and over to Taidehe's store. Mou Zichun asked for water for Liang Wenjin to clean his face. Then he lay down on the kang and smoked a little opium. His face still hurt a lot and he suddenly flinched realizing what had just happened. Today I was truly unconscious, he said to himself. I could have died under the sabers of the young Xiulian or been killed by this big guy. If the old man had tied me up and handed me over to the authorities, my family could have bribed them with a nice sum, but I really would have lost face! Fortunately the young girl was not ruthless and the old man, in his mercy, let me go. Let that be a lesson to me! Only Mou Zichun and Xi Zhongxiao know the bottom line of this affair. My uncle is not going to tell a story where my pride is at stake. But when it comes to Xi Zhongxiao I cannot trust him. If he repeats it, not only is my little reputation ruined, but I won't even be able to leave my house. I'm going to have to apologize as I should, because it will certainly not be him who will come first to be reconciled. If he inquires into the details of the case, he'll have a good laugh, understanding how I got beaten up at the Yu's. I can already see him exclaim: "So boy, you damn insulted me last time. , but I won't hold it against you! Only, know that I know everything now and from now on, if you don't listen to me, we'll see how you look when you leave your house! "

Liang Wenjin was both ashamed and angry, but he couldn't see any other way. In his bed, he found it hard not to think of Xi Zhongxiao and his face ached; he did not sleep all night. The next day it was fine. The three men hired a vehicle and rode back to Nangong. Arrived in his family, Liang Wenjin explained to his parents that, drunk, he had fallen in the street and was injured. The latter reprimanded him severely. Fortunately, his uncle was at his side to testify. He confirmed the facts, revealing nothing about the inside story of the Yu family affair.

Liang Wenjin no longer dared to go out with that swollen face resembling an eggplant and that slight pain in his right buttock he had made while falling. He stayed home and slept all day. He

constantly dreamed of Yu Xiulian. He did not imagine her with her radiant face and sparkling eyes, but rather as the demon yaksha (30), wielding her two sabers. In short, Liang Wenjin had given up on young Yu and would never have the courage to surrender to Julu again.

Liang Wenjin was not very good at martial arts, yet his master was a famous knight from Zhili province. It was a certain Ji Guangjie, an old scholar knight. In love with justice, he had wandered through Jianghu all his life and had never met an adversary of his size. After sixty years, he had retired to Nangong District and lived teaching martial arts; his disciples quickly grew in number. Liang Wenjin and Xi Zhongxiao were sons of wealthy families and, full of goodwill, they took on old Knight Ji as their master.

His way of teaching was very unique: every day he gave his disciples only one sword dance or one boxing sequence to work on, and left them to train themselves. Liang Wenjin and Xi Zhongxiao being both young and wealthy lords, how could they endure such arduous training? Also, after three years of classes, their kung fu level was that of average practitioners. They were proud of their achievements, however insignificant and common, and Knight Ji had never glanced at their practice. After four years in Nangong, the sick old knight Ji passed away. In his entire life, he had no less than thirty disciples, but he really transmitted his art to only one: a young man from Nangong, named Li Mubai.

## Chapter 3

*The young scholar, wielding sword and brush,*

*Knows the desires of spring;*

*In the midst of the tumultuous crowd,*

*He impatiently awaits the appearance of the young girl.*

Li Mubai was a xiucai from Nangong. Tall, he was an elegant young man in his twenties. He lived in Wuli, a small village near Nangong, and depended on his paternal uncle. His parents had not been of this world for a long time. His father was mentioned as a surprising person. His name was Li Fengjie and he was kind of an outsider. He had offered his services to a general whom he had accompanied, thus crossing many countries and befriending many people. Subsequently, in Jiangnan (31), he had met a knight errant by the name of Jiang Nanhe (32), Southern Crane, and they had become sworn brothers. Jiang Nanhe had imparted his knowledge of martial arts to him and the two men had performed many incredible deeds in Jiangnan.

From the age of six, Li Mubai was teaching martial arts with his father. When he was eight years old, an epidemic spread to Jiangnan and his parents both died. In agony and dying, Li Fengjie instructed his alliance brother Southern Crane to take his son Li Mubai to Nangong to his younger brother Li Fengqing's home for his education. After having buried his parents, Southern Crane accompanied Li Mubai to Nangong, then set off on his own to the four corners of the country.

Li Mubai was brought up by his uncle, who cultivated a few dozen mu (33) of land. It was a rather well-off family, but without children, so his uncle treated him like his own son. Li Fengqing was very envious of scholars and above all admired the successful candidates for the exams of the Imperial Academy, whom he worshiped as gods. Li Mubai therefore began studying at a very young age. At thirteen, he had to take the three-year provincial

examination and obtained the rank of xiucai. Obsessed, his uncle longed for him to pass the next level imperial exam, and then finally become a jinshi (34). Only at this time Li Mubai's character changed. His temper had always more or less resembled that of his father. Like him, Li Mubai loved this free and casual life, and did not aspire to that of a poor scholar, wielding only ink and brush. In addition, some of the precepts instilled in his childhood resurfaced. He remembered so well how proud his father was when he taught him the art of the sword, and how prominent and magnanimous Jiang Nanhe was. He constantly told himself that he had to embark on the study of martial arts, because, like his father and Jiang Nanhe, he wanted to become a knight errant of Jianghu, without interest in honors and fortune.

When he was sixteen, Knight Ji Guangjie moved to Nangong and Li Mubai followed his teaching. Some time before, Ji Guangjie had seen Jiang Nanhe again, who told him this: "In Nangong resides the son of an old friend, his name is Li Mubai; if you go there, you must absolutely take him as a disciple and carefully transmit your art to him. Old knight Ji, after inquiring about Li Mubai's origins, treated him particularly well. The young boy was both smarter than the rest and capable of pugnaciously learning. In less than four or five years, Li Mubai had already assimilated everything his master could teach him, from boxing techniques to all kinds of specific kung fu. Absorbed by his practice of martial arts, Li Mubai abandoned his studies. He sat for the provincial exams twice, but never passed them. The young boy was discouraged, not to mention that this failure cast a chill in his relationship with his uncle.

Li Mubai was now twenty-four years old and still unmarried. His uncle and aunt grew more and more upset. The young man had indeed an ideal. He wanted an extremely beautiful wife who practiced martial arts. Her virtue did not matter to him, if she did not meet these two conditions, he would not marry her. His marriage being the most compromised, his friends invariably laughed at him.

That day, Li Mubai was performing a sword dance on the threshing floor in front of the house. His sequences finished, he remained motionless for a long moment, his precious sword in his hand. He

began to observe the young shoots of the wheat fields and the bright peach blossoms beyond the fence. The spring breeze caressed his face and butterflies fluttered around him. On the horizon, changing spring clouds were gathering and floating adrift. He sighed for a long time on his fate. He was about to return when he suddenly heard a horse coming. As he approached, Li Mubai could make out the horseman, who was none other than his companion Xi Zhongxiao.

Xi Zhongxiao wore a silk-lined jacket and satin boots. His long black hair in a braid had beautiful highlights. He was truly the young master of a wealthy family. Li Mubai was not inclined to hang out with such people, but Xi Zhongxiao had always admired his kung fu and his scholarly talent, and often visited him. When the two men were face to face, Li Mubai exclaimed:

"It's been several days since I saw you!"

Xi Zhongxiao got off his mount, tied it to the jujube tree, then shook his clothes.

"I went to Julu for a few days with Liang Wenjin," he replied. "I only came back yesterday!"

"Liang Wenjin opened a shop there, but you, what did you go there to do?"

"To have a good time."

Li Mubai begged him to enter. Xi Zhongxiao, all smiles, continued:

"Guess what brings me today?"

"What do you mean?" Li Mubai wondered.

"Thank me, I'm coming to mediate your wedding!"

"Forget it," replied Li Mubai annoyed. "Stop talking to me about this!"

"This time, I'm sure to make you happy," Xi Zhongxiao said solemnly. "I found you a lovely young girl who excels in the practice

of martial arts. Only, I don't know anyone from her family, I can just tell you who it is; if you like her, go and ask her yourself."

Li Mubai, suddenly interested, asked him with a smile:

"And what is the family of this young girl?"

"Yu Xiongyuan, Julu's Iron Winged Eagle, you know?"

"The famous escort guard Yu, of course I know him, but I've never met him."

"Well, I'm talking about his daughter. Her name is Yu Xiulian. She must be around sixteen or seventeen. I can tell you that she made more than one head spin. Beside her, Xishi could bow her head and Chang'e (35) lose her luster. In Julu, if you mention the beautiful Yu, everyone will know who you are talking about."

"In a small town, it's normal for people to pay attention to a pretty young girl," Li Mubai retorted.

"You're not there, Xi Zhongxiao continued. In the whole of the prefecture, you will not find such beauty! Even if there was another one, people wouldn't forget that the Old Eagle has a lovely daughter. A few days ago, accompanied by her, he returned from his visit to the graves of his ancestors, located outside the city. Halfway, they ran into personal enemies of the old guard who stood in their way, wanting to attack the life of the old man who was then unarmed. The danger was imminent. It was then that, unexpectedly, young Yu Xiulian jumped out of the car, snatched a weapon from one of the individuals and attacked the other four or five fierce enemies. As a result, she injured one of them and put the others to flight..."

"Hey! This kind of girl does not run the streets!" Li Mubai exclaimed under the spell.

"It's rare to find a young girl so beautiful and so gifted in kung fu. After the incident, people knew that the lovely Yu was also an expert in martial arts. Everyone admires her now, but dreads her too; except our young master Liang who, with his high self-esteem,

paid dearly for it in the young girl's hands, almost leaving his skin there. He now hides at home and does not dare to go out; his face is as purple as an eggplant."

"Why did Liang Wenjin get beaten up?" asked Li Mubai.

"Beaten up! You mean almost beat to death!" Xi Zhongxiao sneered. "Liang Wenjin saw with his own eyes young Yu fighting her father's enemies and was fascinated by it. The other night, he went to prowl around the Yu's house to steal something and was caught by the young girl, who beat him badly. The father was indulgent and let him go. He returned sheepishly to tell us about his evening. Young Master Li, continued Xi Zhongxiao, you have always said that you only want to marry a young girl of unparalleled beauty and perfectly mastering martial arts. This young Yu seems to live up to your expectations. Now, if you ride to Julu and challenge the young Yu to kung fu there, you will have the upper hand and can then propose to her father. Not only will you have found the bride you always dreamed of, but you will also bring honor to the people of Nangong!"

Li Mubai got excited at the prospect, then thought about it and said to himself that it was not possible. Smiling, he exclaimed:

"You don't think about it! Do you think a young girl can compete with a man she doesn't know? And even if we fought and I won, her father might be enraged. How then could he take me for a son-in-law?"

Faced with Li Mubai's refusal, Xi Zhongxiao cunningly said:

"I heard that old guard Yu said he would take as his son-in-law whoever defeats his daughter. Despite this proposal, no one has yet dared to try it. I only see you, young lord of exceptional talents, who are quite gifted. And then, having arrived there, just by noticing you, the young girl will perhaps admit defeat."

Xi Zhongxiao kept smiling as he watched Li Mubai. He said to him, "Usually you brag about being better at martial arts than we are. Are you going to take up this challenge? And if, thanks to your precious sword, you return with the young girl, we will be all the



more admiring."

Li Mubai thought for a long time, then ended up saying:

"You praise this young girl, such a rarity on earth, but I have never seen her."

"It's not a problem, she is not perpetually locked in her room like other young girls."

"Fine, I'll go to Julu," he agreed with a smile on his face. "It is unlikely that I will marry her, but this young girl must know that down here there is someone stronger than her in the mastery of martial arts!"

Xi Zhongxiao saw Li Mubai fall into the trap and exclaimed, all smiles:

"Let's do it like this, I'll pick you up early tomorrow and we'll leave together. After you have concluded your engagement, I want to be the first to drink with you to your happiness!"

"Don't talk like that," Li Mubai replied, "I trust myself going to Julu and it is unlikely that I will lose face like Liang Wenjin."

The two men changed the subject and chatted for a while about other things, then Xi Zhongxiao turned away.

Li Mubai found himself alone at home. Deep in thought, he stroked his precious sword. He imagined that this lovely young girl expert in martial arts was coming to him. It was then that a person entered the room and a brutal voice rang out:

"Mubai, didn't you go to your aunt's house to ask if the letter from the capital had arrived?"

The young man came out of his sweet dream. Turning his head, he saw his uncle, Li Fengqing. The latter was dressed in an ample gray padded jacket, tightened at the waist by a wide cloth belt. His grayish beard rose when he spoke to him:

"I see you've really gotten lazy. You don't even know what to do

anymore. Unable to pass the provincial exam, you stay at home doing nothing. At eighty you will still be a poor xiucai, playing with your sword all day. Could it even be worse than now? It would surprise me that you then manage to live from demonstrations of kung fu in the streets!"

His beard was getting more and more raised, which made him even uglier. Saddened, Li Mubai frowned and waited for more reproaches.

"I see that you are still going to be indebted to your aunt," Li Fengqing continued. "You know that her uncle by marriage works in the capital, at the Ministry of Punishments (36), and he is not at all a small civil servant! If you go see him, he will certainly find you a job. And if you work well, your future will be secure."

Li Mubai nodded:

"It's true, but I need a letter from my uncle before I go to Beijing. Otherwise I risk going there for nothing. Yesterday I went to my aunt's house, but the letter still had not arrived. We will have to wait a few more days."

Seizing the opportunity, he continued:

"Two years ago, during the provincial exams, I met a certain Jia Chengxun, from Julu. He successfully passed the exams and now finds himself a district magistrate. He recently returned home. I was thinking of going to Julu tomorrow to say hello. If in the near future he gets an official job again, that will give me a good relationship."

"Absolutely! You have to make as many connections as possible; the more people you know, the better! You can have immense knowledge, but if you stay at home, Liu Bei will not come and get you (37)!" Replied his uncle, before leaving him.

Li Mubai was about to burst into tears, but a new, lovely-looking hope floated before his eyes, easing his pain somewhat. The same day he packed his suitcases. In the early hours, Xi Zhongxiao arrived with one of his family's carts. Li Mubai grabbed his sword

and his luggage and got into the vehicle. Xi Zhongxiao sat down on the stretcher and they set off for Julu District.

Xi Zhongxiao was in a good mood:

"Yesterday, I went to Liang Wenjin's house. I told him you were going to meet young Yu and he still seemed a little jealous. He insisted that I tell you that you have a duty to avenge him when you see the father and the daughter. And that if you came back married to young Yu, he wouldn't want to hear from you anymore."

"He's crossing the line," exclaimed Li Mubai coldly. "Whether or not I marry young Yu is none of his business!"

Wrathful, Li Mubai thought, "If this Yu Xiulian is as talented as Xi Zhongxiao claims, I absolutely must marry her and I must go parading in front of Liang Wenjin."

Xi Zhongxiao saw that he was losing his temper and did nothing to appease him; on the contrary, he continued to talk to him and stir up his anger. Li Mubai realized this and thought that Xi Zhongxiao wasn't taking him to Julu purely on good intentions, maybe he even wanted to see him suffer a setback at the Yu. But Li Mubai was sure of himself and ready to take on the challenge of Xi Zhongxiao.

At noon, they found a small restaurant on the road, rested there for a while, then set off again. They arrived in the middle of the afternoon in the district of Julu. Li Mubai was about to look for an inn, but Xi Zhongxiao complained, saying it was inconvenient, and decided to go to the Taidehe grain store. Xi Zhongxiao always went down there accompanied by Liang Wenjin. He was familiar with the place and knew all the employees and old boss Xu well. When he saw Xi Zhongxiao who was there just two days ago, he hastened to ask for news from Liang Wenjin:

"Are the young lord's wounds getting better?"

"No," Xi Zhongxiao replied. "They are even more swollen and more purplish than before!"

Accompanied by Li Mubai, he entered the shop and lay down on the

wooden bed and then began to smoke opium. While smoking, he chatted about things with boss Xu. Pointing to his companion, he said to him:

"This is Li Mubai, the young lord we often tell you about. He is in Julu today for a marriage affair."

"What family is the girl from?" asked the boss.

"She's the daughter of old escort guard Yu."

At these words, Li Mubai couldn't help but blush.

"Don't listen to him," he said to the boss, "he's not serious. I accompany him to Julu for entertainment."

Despite this statement, boss Xu looked at Li Mubai with wide eyes and said to him in astonishment:

"If you are talking about the young girl from the Yu family, she is really lovely and talented! Despite coming from an escort guard family, she is of an irreproachable virtue and will do honor to the young Lord Li."

Li Mubai still tried to justify himself by all means. Beside him, Xi Zhongxiao smoked quietly without stopping smiling. Old Xu remained chatting with the two men for a while, then withdrew.

Li Mubai was thinking while looking up. Maybe Xi Zhongxiao didn't lie to me, he thought. According to the boss Xu, the young girl is beautiful, talented, and moreover beyond reproach. I am also not from a family of high dignitaries, nothing prevents me from marrying her. Cradled by his sweet illusions, Li Mubai was burning with impatience to see the pretty face of the young girl.

Xi Zhongxiao, who had satisfied his need for opium, called one of the shop's employees. The man in question was called He. He was a distant relative of the Liang family and appeared to be a very cunning person. Responsible for surveying the streets for the business of the store and finding new customers, he was aware of everything that was happening in the street. The interest that the young lords showed in the young Yu did not escape him. Xi

Zhongxiao thus appealed to him directly and questioned him with a smile:

"I left for a few days; is there anything new from the Yu family?"

"They lead a quiet life and know how to stay in their place, what could happen to them?"

"Young Lord Li is here to see the lovely young girl Yu," Xi Zhongxiao continued.

"Nothing could be simpler," said He. "Tomorrow is the Changchun Temple Buddha Ceremony at the Eastern Pass. The young girl will certainly accompany her parents to the monastery to burn incense there. Lord Li could come to the entrance early and wait to see her pass."

Xi Zhongxiao nodded then addressed Li Mubai:

"Today it is getting late. Tomorrow we will go to the monastery to see this festival a bit. We will see it pass on occasion."

"I'm not in such a hurry! Tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, it doesn't matter," Li Mubai said, smiling.

"I'm sure that in fact, deep inside you, there is some impatience!" Xi Zhongxiao said, sitting up on the bed.

After a while, employee He returned to his occupations. Xi Zhongxiao and Li Mubai rested in the store rooms.

At night, Li Mubai slept very badly, languishing after the next day. The light of dawn was barely visible when he rose immediately. After rinsing his mouth and face, Li Mubai dressed specially for this day in a dress lined with sapphire blue silk and put on thin, light boots. Seeing him thus, with his fine features and imposing size, Xi Zhongxiao admired his elegance. "Li Mubai is much stronger than Liang Wenjin or me," he said to himself. "The Yu family can only appreciate such a man. If she lets him pick that rose, how lucky he will be," he continued to think, not without feeling a certain jealousy. Xi Zhongxiao also changed and put on a robe lined with dark red silk with geometric patterns, comparable to those usually

worn for the spring celebrations (38) and put on light white boots. He wrapped a golden belt around his waist, from which he hung a pair of glasses, his purse, and all manner of conspicuous embroidery.

Soon after, the shop served breakfast. Xi Zhongxiao seemed preoccupied and had already sent employee He for a walk in front of the Yu family's house. He came back before the meal was over, smiling.

"Young Lord Li and young girl Yu are predestined," he exclaimed. I have just returned from the alley where the Yu family live, a horse-drawn cart is waiting in front of it. I'm sure the old couple and their daughter are going to the temple."

Xi Zhongxiao then urged Li Mubai:

"Hurry up and finish eating, we have to get going quickly. Otherwise they will arrive before us, mingle with the crowd and we will not find them again."

Li Mubai, who wanted to see the young girl as soon as possible, hastened to finish. The two men refreshed their faces. Xi Zhongxiao told Li Mubai to bring his sword and they left the store.

"Let's first pass in front of their house to see if they are gone!" Xi Zhongxiao said.

The weather was good on this feast day at Changchun Temple (39), located east of the city. In the main streets, passers-by and vehicles abounded and the tiny town of Julu suddenly came alive. Xi Zhongxiao led Li Mubai to the edge of the Yu family's house and pointed to a small black door north of the alley.

"This is where the Old Eagle lives, but the cart is no longer in front!" he exclaimed, suddenly panicked. "Let's not waste time, the young girl will certainly arrive before us at the temple."

They hurried out of the alley and hailed a carter as they rolled into the main street. They got into the vehicle and begged the driver to get to Changchun Temple as soon as possible. The wheels screeched

on the cobblestones and they soon reached the eastern gate of the city. Passers-by and vehicles crowded under the vaults. Many were the horse-drawn carts belonging to wealthy families in which sat ladies, young ladies and maids who came to the temple to make offerings. As they left the gate, stalls selling offerings lined the road, and most passers-by held candles and incense in their hands. Young women from modest families wore new, vermilion clothes. They had coated their faces abundantly with blush and had adorned their heads with all kinds of golden jewelry. Arm in arm, they made manners and moved forward in small groups in a chirp of laughter and words. Riding a fine horse, a son of a wealthy family, closely followed by a young servant, crossed the crowd to rush on a group of young girls.

"Excuse me, watch out, let it go!" He shouted at them as his whip brushed the head of the youngest, slimmest and most elegant girl. The latter, in no way frightened, glared at the rider with an angry look. The young lord then turned his head and, frivolously in the extreme, gave her a smile: "I had not seen you, sister-in-law!" Before relaunching his horse in search of other young women to tease.

The two companions' car, pulled by a mule, followed the crowd in an easterly direction. Xi Zhongxiao, seated above the stretcher, peered all over the place like a hungry bird of prey. He looked everywhere among the young girls, on foot or in the car. But nowhere did he see the charming face of young Yu Xiulian. A little discouraged, he thought to himself that perhaps the young girl was not going to the temple. Li Mubai, leaning out of the carriage window, was also looking out. He passed many beautiful women, but none caught his attention. He said to himself that if young Yu Xiulian looked more or less like these young girls, no matter how good her martial art was, he wouldn't care and would return to Nangong on the spot.

From the car, Li Mubai could already see the two large red masts on which floated the apricot-colored flags, printed with the characters "Changchun, the Eternal". At the entrance to the monastery, one could notice that the red walls and the temple had been recently repainted. In front of the door, many devotees gathered, several itinerant merchants offered some snacks or sweets and monks,

having made vows of poverty, gave alms. It was loud and busy on both sides.

"So many people!" Xi Zhongxiao exclaimed, turning to Li Mubai.

The two men got out of the car. About to follow the crowd into the monastery, a man suddenly called out in a powerful voice:

"Lord Xu!"

Xu Zhongxiao, wondering who it could be, looked around. He saw a man emerging from the crowd waving to them; it was none other than employee He. Xu Zhongxiao, delighted, hastened to pull Li Mubai to join him. The driver then exclaimed:

"Lords, you haven't paid me yet!"

Li Mubai made his way to retrace his steps and pay him.

Arrived at He's side, Xi Zhongxiao asked him:

"But how did you manage to be here already?"

He smirked, blinking but didn't answer her.

"I saw the young girl Yu and her mother," he told her. There is also fellow with a pale complexion that accompanies them.

"Where?" Xi Zhongxiao promptly asked.

"They just got back. They must have reached the Great Hall by now and must be burning the incense there."

Xi Zhongxiao urged Li Mubai to join him. Xi Zhongxiao passed first, followed by He and then Li Mubai, and they pushed through the crowd to advance. People pushed around by Xi Zhongxiao, or who almost tripped when getting caught in Li Mubai's scabbard, glared at them and kept muttering. Xi Zhongxiao paid no attention to them and walked straight into the main hall of the temple. The crowd was even denser there, and clouds of smoke swirled around. In front of the statues, men, women, young and old bowed down with their faces to the ground and burned incense, without being able to



distinguish to which Buddha they were addressing their vows. Xi Zhongxiao and Li Mubai were looking all around. Employee He suddenly pulled Xi Zhongxiao's sleeve and said:

"Wouldn't that be her?"

Li Mubai and Xi Zhongxiao both followed his gaze. In front of them, they saw at the time only a man in his forties with a pale complexion, dressed in a short blue ensemble, who made his way through apologizing. Behind him indeed followed a rather short woman, in her fifties, dressed in a black satin tunic, who was supported by a young girl.

This young girl was not more than sixteen, seventeen. Very attractive, her face, oval, was slightly painted. Her eyes were clear and lively, they seemed to smile; and there was nothing seductive about that smile. The bridge of her nose was slightly large and her cherry lips were very red. Her eyes were beautiful and shiny, her eyebrows thin and delicate. She had made a long braid of her shiny black hair and planted a Chinese rose made of silk at her temples, as well as a gold hairpin. Two drop earrings set with small pearls swayed at her lobes. She was wearing a rose-colored top, with a thin, delicate butterfly embroidered on one side, and light green satin trousers. Crowded on all sides, you could not see her little lotus feet. As she supported her mother with both arms, one could notice that she wore two or three rings, and that on one of her delicate wrists she had put on a gold bracelet.

Xi Zhongxiao energetically pulled Li Mubai and said:

"Look quickly! It's her!"

His gaze and that of He were riveted on the young girl. Li Mubai could not detach his either, thinking that he could not, even in his sweetest dreams, imagine anything more precious and more exquisite, to the point of forgetting where he was.

The young girl, still supporting her mother, headed for the exit. Xi Zhongxiao pulled Li Mubai and followed suit. The two men raised their heads above the crowd and never took their eyes off the silhouette of this extraordinary and attractive young girl.

## Chapter 4

*With his sword he fights the lovely young woman,*

*And grabs her embroidered handkerchief;*

*Equipped simply, riding the wide paths,*

*He unexpectedly meets very ill-intentioned individuals.*

On this feast day at Changchun temple, Lady Yu, herself a Buddhist, took her daughter to burn incense. Old Yu was not reassured and instructed Cui San to accompany them to the monastery. Usually, the young girl liked the animation, but that morning the crowd was too dense and she did not appreciate being so crowded. What she hated most were the people who stared at her insistently. Yu Xiulian didn't know that she was so pretty, but she knew that those who looked at her like this, especially young people, could not but be mean. Today, the people watching most happened to be Xi Zhongxiao and Li Mubai. These two squarely accompanied young Yu out of the temple, watched her get in the car, then followed suit.

Although young Yu did not stare at the two men, she did notice Xi Zhongxiao's embroidery, as well as Li Mubai's scabbard. She suspected that the sturdy man in the sapphire blue robe, carrying a sword, was practicing martial arts. Seeing them following me so closely, she thought, I can only assume that they are my father's enemies! After getting into the car, she leaned out the window to look out. The two men were still following her, without ceasing to stare at the vehicle. "I was sure of it. They follow us to find out where we live." The young Xiulian, in no way frightened, was quite the contrary delighted. If it turned out that she was right, then she would have the opportunity to deploy her art.

Cui San had also noticed the suspicious attitude of the two men. "If these two scoundrels continue to look at the young mistress like that, I'll show them no mercy if we meet!" He thought. Annoyed, he begged the driver to speed up. The big cart immediately began to fly over the cobblestones, and passed the city gate shortly after.

For a while now, Xi Zhongxiao and Li Mubai had abandoned their companion He to run after the car. But seeing it accelerate, the two men gave up their pursuit. Li Mubai turned to Xi Zhongxiao and smiled:

"They saw us coming!"

"Let them go," replied Xi Zhongxiao. "Either way, we know where they live!"

The two men reached the west gate. They called a cart and went straight to the Yu family alley. After paying, they entered the hutong (40). The two men stopped in front of the entrance of the Yu. The two leaves of the door were particularly well closed. Doubtful, they looked at them for a long moment.

"Friend," Xi Zhongxiao said in a low voice, "now that you have seen the young girl and are in front of her door, take your courage in both hands! Knock, go in and measure yourself against her; you will win and conclude your marriage with this beauty in the process. Who then could not envy you?"

Li Mubai did not find the knocking on the door insolent, but he could clearly see in Xi Zhongxiao's eyes that he was going straight into the wall. Not really knowing why, as though obsessed body and soul with the young Xiulian, he saw his leg climb on the stone step of the entrance threshold and his hand knock against the door knocker in spite of himself. Xi Zhongxiao turned pale when he saw him do so and immediately took a few steps back. Li Mubai insisted and sounded the clapper several times. The door opened. A man of about thirty, of tall stature, came out. His face and chest tanned, he had wrapped his braid around his head. He wore tight pants and light boots.

"Who are you looking for?" He said to Li Mubai terrifyingly.

Li Mubai, who had come to measure himself with the young girl and not to irritate this terrible fellow, answered him in an affable tone:

"I'm coming to visit old guard Yu."

At that moment, the pale man he had seen in the temple appeared in the doorway and whispered a few words in the ear of the colossus. The latter, becoming furious, exclaimed:

"Bring me my saber!" "

With a leap, he crossed the threshold of the door and tried to grab Li Mubai. The young man immediately got off the step and the man's hand brushed his sleeve.

"What are you up to?" the man threw at him. "You chase them from the temple to here... I warn you: if you want to kill old Yu, ask me first, Sun Zhengli, the Eagle of the Five Talons, if that's a good idea."

He then struck him with a punch that Li Mubai dismissed with his hand. Cui San arrived, armed with the sharp sword. Sun Zhengli immediately grabbed it and attacked the young man. Li Mubai drew his precious sword and went to meet him. Saber and sword clashed. After a few engagements, Yu Xiulian appeared at the door, brandishing her pair of swords. She had changed and was now wearing a short outfit, as well as an embroidered handkerchief around her head.

"Big Brother Sun, step aside and leave him to me!" She cried.

The young girl motioned for Li Mubai to approach. He leaps aside and says to Sun Zhengli:

"I have no bad intentions! I have heard of the girl's fame and I would like to compete with her. Whatever the result, after the fight, I'll go, without disturbing you!

"Bastard," grumbled Sun Zhengli, "my mistress does not care about a fight with you!"

Sun Zhengli rushed at him. Yu Xiulian, wielding her two blades, also approached. Sun Zhengli insisted that she stay behind, but Xiulian did not back down and continued to swirl her sabers like two flowers, no longer allowing Sun Zhengli to move forward. While parrying the assault on the three blades with one hand by

blocking them with his sword, Li Mubai got rid of his scabbard by throwing it to the ground and straightened the hem of his jacket with his other hand. More at ease, he could finally deploy his talents, without underestimating Xiulian's sabers.

After ten exchanges, Sun Zhengli simply could no longer participate in the fight. He stood to the side, saber in hand, panting, and told Xiulian to pull back and let him have it. Li Mubai's sword, like a silvery snake, struck in the west and struck Xiulian's two swords in the east, seriously shaking her wrists. Li Mubai's technique was smoother and his movements more agile. He wore a slight smile and his eyes showed a deep tenderness. All the sword blows he made were restrained and measured, as if he was afraid of hurting the young girl.

Xiulian was doing her best to find a flaw in his technique, and was both surprised and embarrassed. From the entrance, Cui San watched the fight and worried that the young Xiulian surrendered. Sun Zhengli, having caught his breath, again assaulted Li Mubai. Xi Zhongxiao, who had slipped away from the start, watched them from afar. Many passers-by had stopped to look at them, but not one dared to go and separate them. As sabers and swords whirled together, inextricably linked, old guard Yu Xiongyuan arrived at the entrance to the alley, his cage of thrushes in hand. Xi Zhongxiao took flight as soon as he saw him. Someone called him:

"Lord Yu, come quickly! Your daughter is fighting!"

The stunned old guard hurried up the hutong and saw his daughter and Sun Zhengli, all arms raised, fighting a young swordsman. Observing his technique, old Yu, perceptive, knew immediately that he had received the teaching of a great master. For him, Xiulian would certainly not be matched against him, let alone Sun Zhengli. The young man didn't look malicious, but old Yu stepped closer and shouted:

"Stop!"

At the same time, Li Mubai slashed the embroidered handkerchief from Xiulian's head with his sword. The young girl ran to her father's side and was alarmed:

"Daddy, this man is harassing us!"

Out of breath, Sun Zhengli was still fighting head-to-head with Li Mubai. The old guard exchanged his cage for his daughter's sabers. He rushed forward and deflected the blows the two men were giving each other.

"You don't have to fight," he fumed. "What do you have to say. Speak, I am Yu Xiongyuan!"

Li Mubai stopped dead and took a few steps back. Sun Zhengli lowered his sword and said breathlessly:

"This man is terrible! Master, let us join forces to defeat him, let him understand who he is dealing with!"

"What is there really to understand," replied old Yu sarcastically. "We try to lead a peaceful life, but men continually come to harass us!"

He motioned for his daughter to come in and addressed Li Mubai:

"Your Excellency, with your imposing demeanor and mastery of martial arts, I don't think I'm dealing with anyone from Jianghu. We've never met, so let's not talk about any enmity between us. Why are you coming to me today, sword in hand, to brutalize my daughter and my disciple?"

Li Mubai, extremely confused at the remonstrances of the old guard, picked up his scabbard and hung it around his waist. With the sword drawn in, his clothes shaken, Li Mubai respectfully greeted the old guard and said:

"Dear elder, do not get carried away. Today I know that I was insolent. Know, however, that I am not nourished by any bad intention. My name is Li Mubai, I am from Nangong. My teachers are Jiang Nanhe and Ji Guangjie."

Hearing the names of the famous knights, Guard Yu was surprised:

"Hey! You would be a disciple of Ji Guangjie! He was an old friend of mine and often came to see me, we were like brothers! As for

Jiang Nanhe, I never met him, but I heard about his fame. I can consider you, so to speak, as my nephew! All smiles, he stepped forward to shake Li Mubai's hand and exclaimed:

"Come on, let's go inside and discuss this in more detail!" Learning that the old guard was a friend of his late master, Li Mubai felt even more ashamed and followed him. The old guard led him to the west wing of the outer courtyard and begged Cui San to serve him tea. Old Yu introduced him to Sun Zhengli, to whom Li Mubai apologized.

"Since I closed my escort agency, five or six years ago now," old Yu began, "I don't move from home and have no contact with my friends in Jianghu. Your teacher Ji Guangjie, who lived less than a day from here, still came to see me a few times, but I never visited Nangong. Then I learned that he was no longer of this world. Now that I am old, I no longer know who the newcomers to Jianghu are. If today you hadn't said that Ji Guangjie was your teacher, I simply would never have known that he had such a talented disciple during his lifetime."

Li Mubai briefly recounted the fate of his family, then the old guard asked him the reason for his coming. Faced with this question, Li Mubai blushed with shame, not knowing what to answer. Xiulian's beauty and dexterity clouded him. He told himself that, thanks to the bond that the old guard had just mentioned, the marriage would undoubtedly be granted to him. Li Mubai whispered between his teeth:

"I have wanted to meet my venerable uncle for a long time, so I have come to pay you my respects. Recently I heard that you have a daughter who is good at martial arts and you announced that if a young bachelor comes out of a fight with her victorious, he can propose to her. So here I am, having taken the liberty of measuring myself with the young lady."

Li Mubai took out of his sleeve the piece of embroidered cloth that he had removed with his sword from Xiulian's head. He placed it with both hands on the table in front of the old guard's eyes, thus signifying his victory over the young girl. Seeing him do this, the old guard got irritated then let out a small smile and finally burst

out laughing:

"My brave nephew, who did you hear this from? I never said such things!"

This response had the effect of a fist caught in the face. Li Mubai immediately changed his expression and wanted to say something, but the old guard continued, smiling:

"From a very young age, my daughter has been promised in marriage to the second son of escort guard Meng, from the Xuanhua government. This year, Xiulian is seventeen, I will send her to her new family next year. How could I talk about marriage arranged by a martial arts challenge? If, however, you tell me the truth about what brings you here, I think your friends have played a trick on you. But rest assured, I am not angry and you must not be upset. In the end, today I learned that my brother Ji has a disciple of great personality who excels in martial arts! In the future, you are welcome to stay with me, and if I find a young girl who can suit you, you can be sure that I will mediate your marriage."

Li Mubai's heart suddenly froze. It was as if his future was collapsing and all his hopes were vanishing. Confused, he sighed:

"Uncle, don't tell me more, I don't know where to put myself!" In his deep amazement, he stamped his foot and stood up.

"How presumptuous I have been," he whispered. "Fortunately, you don't blame me, but now I won't have the courage to see you again!"

He was already heading for the exit. Old guard Yu also felt very embarrassed and tried to talk him out of leaving:

"Why not stay a little longer? We will talk about something else, this story is irrelevant and we will quickly forget it!"

"No, I prefer to leave immediately," Li Mubai replied.

With folded hands, he greeted the old guard very respectfully, who accompanied him to the door.



"When you see your friends again," he advised him, "don't argue with them over this story. Among young people, aren't you always playing tricks on each other?"

"I don't blame them," replied the young man. I can only blame myself for being so gullible!"

Li Mubai folded his hands again in the direction of the old guard and walked down the alley. Like a candidate who has just failed the imperial exams, Li Mubai was dejected and had cotton legs. Out of the hutong, he saw Xi Zhongxiao waiting for him. The latter hastened to approach as soon as he saw him and asked:

"So the marriage is concluded?"

Li Mubai smirked in annoyance.

"You know how to deceive people!" He exclaimed as he stepped forward.

But Xi Zhongxiao could not stop there. They returned to Taidehe's grain store. Li Mubai took off his sword and put it on the table, heaving long sighs. Then he sat down, completely desperate. Xi Zhongxiao lay down on the kang and picked up an opium pipe.

"Friend, why are you saying I lied to you? Could it be that the young girl Yu is not beautiful enough? Her martial art without interest? That she is not worthy of you?"

At these words, Li Mubai looked even sadder and added:

"Didn't you lie to me? When did old Yu say he was looking for a son-in-law for his daughter and had a martial arts duel to find him?"

Xi Zhongxiao chuckled:

"If I hadn't told you that, you probably would never have agreed to go! And no matter what old Yu said or not, you have measured yourself against his daughter. He had the opportunity to observe your talent and your mastery of martial arts! How then could he refuse your marriage proposal?"

"Old guard Yu was a friend of our master," Li Mubai replied coldly. "He has long since promised his daughter in marriage to the second son of escort guard Meng from the Xuanhua government. Next year, the girl will join her new family."

"This young Meng is lucky to have his marriage arranged with this rare pearl," said Xi Zhongxiao disappointed. "We do not have the same luck! Friend, you are doing pretty well. You fought with her for a while and grabbed her handkerchief. Nothing like Liang Wenjin, who had his portrait painted. How bad he is!"

Xi Zhongxiao chuckled and continued to draw deep puffs on his pipe.

Li Mubai didn't want to waste his time with him going into details. He remained motionless, seated in his chair. He thought back to this wonderful Xiulian and her superb performance on sabers. If I had such a wife, even a poor one all my life, I would have no regrets, he thought. I'm over twenty, I'm not married and that's the kind of personality I'm looking for. Now everything is over, young Yu is promised to the Meng family; I will never be interested in someone else again. My marriage is really in jeopardy. After meeting Xiulian, where on earth could I still find a girl of this caliber, so beautiful and so talented! Li Mubai sighed in emotion and couldn't keep still. He urged Xi Zhongxiao to return to Nangong without delay,

"Why are you in such a hurry?" Xi Zhongxiao asked him. "Don't you have nothing to do at home also?"

"If you don't want to go, I'll rent a cart. I don't want to stay here anymore."

"You have a very difficult character, no wonder you can't find a wife," Xi Zhongxiao replied unhappily. "Can't we really stay one more day in Julu?"

Employee He then entered the room. Li Mubai took the opportunity to ask him to rent a vehicle to return to Nangong.

"Is Lord Li in such a hurry? Isn't it possible for him to stay here a few more days?"

"No, I have to go. Could you find me someone who is going to Nangong?" Li Mubai replied, who didn't intend to linger any longer.

Servant He glanced at Xi Zhongxiao. He still had some small business to deal with in Julu and didn't appreciate Li Mubai's impatience. He nodded:

"Fine, go and rent a cart for Lord Li. Pick up someone you know. Let Lord Li not be prevented from returning to Nangong... or anywhere, for that matter, even to the monks."

Xi Zhongxiao straightened up and said to He:

"You don't know, Lord Li is not marrying young Yu and he's very upset!"

"You took me here to do an absurd thing," said Li Mubai, "and you're still laughing at me?"

Xi Zhongxiao laughed heartily. The servant He dared not do the same and slipped away to carry out his mission. Shortly after, a cart appeared. Li Mubai grabbed his bundle and sword and climbed into it. Boss Xu walked him to the door.

"Lord Li," he said, "when you have time, come back and see us."

With folded hands, Li Mubai greeted him from the cart.

He had a good trip; of course, he was not as enthusiastic as he was on the way out. He gazed distractedly at the spring scenes that presented themselves to him. He arrived in the evening at his home in Nangong. After paying, he found himself alone in his small room.

His uncle passed by to ask him if he had been able to meet this former magistrate friend. Li Mubai explained to him that he had not been able to see him, because he had already left for the capital for a post; his uncle was in despair at this news.

That night, Li Mubai couldn't swallow anything, nor did he have the heart to read. He remained planted in front of the only lamp in the room, plunged in deep sadness. In his sleep, he dreamed that he was challenging young Yu Xiulian. Old guard Yu was there too,

promising him his daughter in marriage. When he woke up he saw the moon shining through the window. Everything was quiet, he sighed for a long time. The next day he did not practice the sword. He gazed at the young shoots of wheat grown at the entrance to the village and the peach blossoms; in the distance, poplars, willows and green hills accentuated his melancholy; he was at his worst.

Two days had passed when Xi Zhongxiao came to visit him. He wanted to take him to Liang Wenjin's, but Li Mubai refused. Xi Zhongxiao spoke about the young Xiulian again, but Li Mubai stopped him dead. Seeing that he was taking this so seriously, Xi Zhongxiao was upset. He stayed a moment longer, then left. As he left the room, he smiled inwardly, "Li Mubai, you're worrying about nothing. It is quite possible that old Yu will reverse his decision by breaking off the engagement with the Meng family and then promise you his daughter. For his part, Li Mubai had had enough of these two young lords and did not wish to see them again.

More than two months passed. The pomegranates blazed, the foliage of the sophoras and that of the willows spread their shade. The start of summer was already here, but at home, Li Mubai was more and more indolent. He spent his days reading the poems of the Tang Dynasty and especially sleeping. He neglected the writing of the *bagu* (41) and no longer trained in boxing, kung fu or the sword. He was neglecting his outfit and his mind was more and more absent. He no longer knew what his reason for living was.

One day, his uncle Li Fengqing came back very happy to visit his aunt. He brought back a letter from the capital which he presented to Li Mubai. This paternal aunt had been married to the influential Qi family. One of his uncles, called Qi Dianchen, worked in the capital at the Ministry of Punishments.

A year ago, Li Fengqing asked this aunt to send a message to Qi Dianchen to find Li Mubai a job. A response had finally arrived and begged Li Mubai to come to Beijing.

"You see," Li Fengqing said enthusiastically, "your uncle is a really good person! He's certainly already found you a job, but wants to meet you first. Anyway, when you arrive in Beijing, you won't have to worry about accommodation or your meals, he will take care of

it. You realize, if you get an official post in the ministry, you will have even more power than a magistrate! Only, you have to apply yourself in your work and change your behavior a little. No question of being difficult and not listening to what you are told."

Li Mubai suddenly found the desire to travel. He had always heard that Beijing was a sumptuous place, with many historical sites. He enthusiastically agreed to go there, because it opened up new horizons for him. His uncle told him to get his things ready and consulted the almanac (42). Li Mubai is expected to leave in two days, a particularly good time for a trip. The next day, after having prepared everything, the young man went to say goodbye to his aunt. On the day of departure, Li Fengqing gave him fifty liang of money for his travel expenses. Li Mubai rented a cart and, armed with his canvas bag and sword, said goodbye to his uncle and aunt. The cart headed north, Li Mubai was leaving Nangong District.

The young man was not really interested in the job, he especially wanted to travel the Jianghu and discover famous places. During this trip, he also hoped to meet a young girl of the same caliber as Yu Xiulian and finally be able to get married.

It was very hot that day. In the cart it was suffocating. Li Mubai calculated that he had the fifty liang that his uncle had given him, as well as a little over twenty liang that he had never used. In all, he had almost eighty liang of fine silver and immediately thought of buying a horse. When he arrived at Ji Prefecture, Li Mubai sent the cart back and went to buy the animal. He spent forty liang for a white horse that was not the strongest, and spent another eight liang on the purchase of a second-hand, rather worn-out saddle. Now equipped, Li Mubai proudly rode his mount, brandishing his whip.

Ever since he was little he loved to ride a horse. In Nangong, Liang Wenjin's family kept two animals that he often borrowed; he was a very good rider. Despite these heavy expenses, he felt himself redoubled in energy. Now that I have a mount, he said to himself, I can roam the Jianghu, what's the point of getting married, let's enjoy life instead! It was so hot that he bought a large straw hat which, tilted, also gave shade to his horse. This hat brought out his short black tunic and his double-edged sword (43) hanging from the

saddle; he really looked like a young knight errant accustomed to Jianghu.

Li Mubai whipped his horse and left Ji Prefecture, riding safely on the main road, heading north. He rode over seventy li that day. He crossed the Fuyang River and found a place to spend the night. The next day, at dawn, he resumed his journey, still heading north. At around ten o'clock, he reached the border of Wuqiang District. Faced with the unbearable heat, Li Mubai preferred to walk slowly. On the way, few were the passers-by and the carts. He was thinking about what he would have to do when he arrived in Beijing. If his uncle found him a job at the Ministry of Punishment, he would be plunged into paperwork all day, and that would be the end of him. He still preferred to find a job as an escort guard or a boxing teacher. His uncle, official of the capital, surely would never let him do these kinds of trades. This future life in Peking did not please him much and seemed to him really of no great interest; he was less and less in a hurry to advance under this scorching summer sun.

After browsing a dozen li, Li Mubai heard horses behind him. He turned around and suddenly saw three horsemen coming like arrows, which brushed against him closely. They were two men and a young woman. The horsemen wore short tunics and large straw hats; one was tall, the other rather stout. The young girl must have been in her twenties. Her head was covered with the black mourning band. She was wearing a pale red silk jacket and black silk pants. She wore little red satin shoes, like those worn by women with bound feet. She rode standing on the stirrups and seemed to be used to riding like that. The saddles of these three horsemen attracted particular attention because scabbards of sabers were attached to them. Li Mubai, surprised, wondered what could be about. They don't look like escort guards, he thought, but rather Jianghu thieves or robbers. This is how his honesty made him step up and follow them.

Separated from the three riders by only ten gallops, Li Mubai followed them quickly, attentive to their behavior. The tall man was in his thirties. His face and chest were tanned, he sported a thin beard. The healthy man was rather short and was certainly in his twenties. He had a crimson face and large, terrifying eyes. The

young woman, who was no more than twenty-three, twenty-four, had a long face and a slightly tanned complexion. Her features were pretty, if only she hadn't had a birthmark on her left cheek that clearly seemed to show her fierce nature. The three riders did not speak to each other during their ride, but whipped their horses and hurried forward.

They turned to observe Li Mubai who followed them a few li back. Puzzled, they exchanged a few words. Li Mubai, unperturbed, rode, keeping his distance. Covering a little more than a li, the three riders suddenly held back the bridle of their horses. Li Mubai continued to advance fearlessly. The tall man blocked the road with his horse and motioned for him to approach.

"Friend, what are you doing here?" He asked him.

Li Mubai looked taken aback and said:

"I'm riding on the path!"

"Where are you going?" the man of tall stature prompted him immediately.

"Beijing!"

The man seemed even more suspicious of this answer and, eyeing him from head to toe, he tried to guess who he was dealing with.

Beside him, the crimson-faced man adds, giving him an angry look:

"We don't care where you go. We ask you why you've been following us like this for a while."

Despite his terrifying look, Li Mubai, not at all afraid, said to him with a mocking laugh:

"You are not serious? It is a wide road, very busy. And whether you are a merchant or a traveler, everyone can walk there as they wish. You in front, me behind, to each his own way. Where do you see I'm following you? I wandered Jianghu for over ten years, traveled all over the country and would I need to follow you so as not to get lost?"

Li Mubai had not finished his sentence when the young woman had taken out her sword; but a dissuasive glance from the tall man stopped her. He, intimidated by Li Mubai's bluster, couldn't figure out what kind of man he was and didn't want to fight.

"We understand, friend!" he said smiling. "You are right, to each his own way. Let's go," he continued, addressing his two companions, "we'll see what he will do!"

The three horsemen, furious, brandished their whips. Their mounts, as if they were flying away, set off in a northerly direction, raising a cloud of dust. On his horse, Li Mubai burst out laughing.



## Chapter 5

*Encountering danger once again and the sharp edges of steel,*

*The young man comes to the aid of the father and his daughter;*

*They all find themselves locked up in the inn,*

*The lovely young girl is noticed by a vile being.*

The behavior of the three individuals challenged Li Mubai. They must be Jianghu bandits, he said to himself. They must have thought that I too was someone from Rivers and Lakes and did not want to upset me. Seeing them in such a hurry doesn't mean anything to me, they have to prepare something. Now that I have crossed their path, how can I let them go? Let's go see what they're up to. If it comes to committing atrocities, I will draw my sword. Seeing only their silhouette, he hastened to catch up with them. But after ten li, the passers-by and carts were more numerous and the three riders had sped away. Li Mubai, fearing to run into a passer-by, held back his horse's bridle. Somewhat disappointed, he began to walk slowly. He was on the edge of a bustling city and suddenly felt his stomach growl. He quickened his pace to enter the village and found a small restaurant where he could satisfy himself with two bowls of noodles, then led his horse to the forage store before setting off again. He had only recently been riding when he heard someone call out loudly:

"Lord Li! Lord Li!"

Very surprised, he turned around and saw a cart and a horse ridden by an old man, with a graying beard and of a martial stature; it was none other than old guard Yu Xiongyuan, the Iron Winged Eagle of Julu. Young Yu Xiulian, the one who had broken his heart and caused so much torment, was sitting next to her mother in the cart. The young man, feeling his heart accelerate, did not dare to let his gaze linger on the young girl. He dismounted and respectfully saluted the old guard. Yu Xiongyuan smiles:

"Get back up quickly," he told him affably, clasping his hands. "You

are too polite! I'm not in great shape, forgive me for staying in the saddle."

Li Mubai had seen himself at home two months before, in such an embarrassing situation, and blushed. He risked another glance in the direction of the cart, but the girl had already lowered the black gauze curtain. Her heart ached. Li Mubai was restraining his horse, having no idea what to say interesting to the old guard.

"Dear nephew Li," old Yu told him as if he had totally forgotten what happened, where are you going?

"I'm going to Beijing to see a relative," replied Li Mubai, still confused.

"This is the first time that you go to the capital?"

"I went there once, but didn't stay long."

"It really is a beautiful place. When I was young, I lived there for several years. I still have friends at the Taixing escort agency, located near Qianmen in the Damochang district (44). If you meet them, tell them you know me. We are still on good terms."

Li Mubai nodded several times.

"And you uncle, where are you going?"

After some hesitation, he answered, pointing to the cart:

"I bring them to the Baoding government."

Li Mubai was dumbfounded for a moment, still holding his horse's bridle.

"Dear nephew," the old man continued, "if you're in a hurry, I won't hold you back! We are slower than you and we will delay you."

Li Mubai, seeing an opportunity to slip away, greeted with folded hands and said:

"I'll drop by to visit you when I come back. Do you want me to

bring you something from the capital?"

"Thank you. I don't need anything," he smiles.

Li Mubai pulled the saddle up to him and mounted his horse. He took leave of the old guard and was about to set off when the latter suddenly called him back. He seemed to have something to ask of him.

"What's wrong, uncle?" Li Mubai asked.

The old guard thought for a moment but finally said nothing to him. The cart pulled up to their side and the gauze curtain opened, revealing Xiulian's face.

"Let's go, daddy!" Exclaimed the young girl.

Li Mubai took the opportunity to look at her. She was resplendent. Old Yu exclaimed with a smile:

"I'm really old, I forgot what I wanted to say. It was probably of no great importance. Dear nephew, go ahead. It'll come back to me when we meet again!"

Li Mubai, puzzled, greeted him once again with folded hands and set off again, whipping his horse. He galloped like an arrow and only turned after a moment to see them slowly advancing. He was in all his forms, totally captivated by the magnificent Xiulian, who had nevertheless made him suffer for several months. Li Mubai found the old guard's behavior strange. "Why did he call me back and finally say nothing to me? Old Guard Yu is a straightforward person; what was wrong with him? We are not familiar and the incident two months ago could have disappointed him. However, he saw me today in this village and caught my attention. If he hadn't called me, I would have continued on my way. He even clearly called me "nephew", as if he had forgotten this unfortunate story. He really sounded sincere, would he have something to ask me?"

Li Mubai was still heartbroken. Maybe Xiulian's marriage to the Meng family was just a lie, he suddenly imagined. During those two months, old Yu actually learned about my background and

character, and now he wants me to marry his daughter!"

Li Mubai was overjoyed. "Earlier, as soon as she saw me, Xiulian lowered the curtain because she was embarrassed. Why was she uncomfortable? Probably because she knows her father is planning to get us engaged!"

The more he thought about it, the more he found it wonderful and kept looking back. The old guard on his horse still escorted the slowly moving car, the curtain down.

Li Mubai wondered why the Yu family went to Baoding. Stung by curiosity, he thought to turn around and walk in their company, but finally found it quite rude. He had an idea. He walked another four or five lilies and found himself in front of a pine forest. It was apparently the burial place of an illustrious family. Li Mubai dismounted and walked through the woods, holding the bridle. Birds frightened by these intruders flew in all directions. He tied his mount to a tree and settled himself against a chipped stele where he rested for a moment.

Shortly after, he heard the sound of hooves as well as the sound of an approaching cart. Li Mubai peeked at the edge of the forest to make sure it was indeed the old guard's convoy. He couldn't help but giggle and waited a long time for it to pass him. Then he picked up his horse and got out of the woods. Looking into the distance, he saw that the old guard's convoy was already more than a li ahead of him.

"Good," he said to himself as he climbed back on his horse, "I just have to follow them now. Let's see what they are going to do in Baoding."

He was on his way again when the sound of galloping sounded behind him. Turning around, he saw a huge cloud of dust. The three horsemen he had met that morning were riding at full speed. "What are they doing," Li Mubai wondered, most surprised. "At this speed, how come they end up behind me?" The three individuals caught up with him.

"Friend, you are ahead of us now!" The tall man called out to him.

The other two riders just stared at him. They passed him and continued their mad race north.

Li Mubai was dumbfounded, then whipped his horse to follow in their footsteps. Quickly, he noticed that the three horsemen had just caught up with old Yu's convoy and saw them leap from their horses and emerge glittering steel sabers.

"Aiya!" He cried frightened, before vigorously whipping his mount.

The convoy found itself surrounded and the old guard sprang from his horse, drawing his blade to engage in fierce combat with the three bandits. Then it was Yu Xiulian who jumped out of the cart with her two swords to help her father. She attacked the young woman. Launched at full speed, Li Mubai's horse took off and the young man cried:

"Stop! Stop!"

Father, daughter and attackers were already in more than twenty exchanges. Old Yu's sword technique was very expert, but with his great age and slow movements, he couldn't have the upper hand against the two bandits. As for the young woman, she was the fiercest and Yu Xiulian could not afford any inattention. Li Mubai moved closer. Sword in hand, he leaped from his horse and rushed at the two individuals.

"Uncle, back off please!" He called out.

Old Yu was relieved to see Li Mubai come running and let him intervene by taking a few steps back.

The crimson-faced man snapped furiously:

"That we were fighting, how does that concern you?"

"Get out of the way before it's too late!" exclaimed the other. "We have nothing against you and we wouldn't want to hurt you!"

"Bastards! If you brutalize my Uncle Yu, it's like attacking me!" Li Mubai growled, mad with rage.

He raised his precious sword like a silvery snake, forcing the two thieves to back away. The old guard then rushed to the rescue of his daughter. Li Mubai injured the tall man. Seeing that he couldn't beat Li Mubai, the purple-faced man turned around and grabbed a horse to run away. He then shouted to the young woman:

"Little sister, hurry and run away!"

This one was really fierce. Impassive, she attacked the old guard and her daughter with her single blade and forced them to back away. Li Mubai found that she mastered her art tremendously. He did not pursue the man, but hastened to help the father and daughter.

With Li Mubai in addition, the young woman was unable to defend herself further and exclaimed:

"How many have you come to beat me!"

She didn't have time to finish her sentence as Xiulian touched her upper arm.

"Aïyo!" She cried before falling to the ground.

Young Xiulian advanced on her with her two blades, but her father held her back. Li Mubai would do the same. The man with the purplish face had already disappeared in the distance.

The fight had stirred up many passers-by, stopped on either side of the road, who were now approaching. The tall man with an injured left leg was sitting on the ground and moaning in pain. The intrepid young woman was seriously wounded in the arm. Her thin, pale red dress was now tinged with dark red. She was desperately trying to grab a hold of a tree and get up, and eventually leaned against it. Livid, she glared at the old guard:

"Three to one," she roared, "what kind of hero are you?"

Then she cursed Li Mubai, and finally insult the young Xiulian with all her aggressiveness. She got angry and brandished her sword.

"Let me put an end to this fury!" She cried with raised eyebrows.

Li Mubai stepped forward to intervene:

"Young girl, don't hurt her any more. There are too many witnesses now. We will take it to the authorities, who will take care of it."

Xiulian was furious and couldn't catch her breath. She looked up to look at Li Mubai, then returned to her father's side.

Old Guard Yu put his sword in its scabbard and bowed to the passers-by:

"Good people, you have all seen it. We were walking quietly when these three individuals appeared, with their sabers, who wanted to kill us. If my daughter and I hadn't practiced martial arts a bit and weren't armed as a precaution, we would undoubtedly have suffered a terrible fate!"

People were outraged in favor of the old guard. Some started kicking the injured man and questioned him:

"You are thieves, aren't you! Where are you from? Hurry and tell us the truth!"

"Don't accuse us unfairly," replied the injured man, moaning. We are not thieves and neither did he treat us like that! We demand revenge. Our hatred has been accumulating for more than ten years, because this man killed my master!"

It was then that the young woman began to shout at the old guard:

"Yu, quickly give us a cart and we'll be forgiving. If we sue you, you know it won't work to your advantage. I warn you, we have several brothers who will never forgive you for having delivered us to the yamen (45)!"

The old guard was sweating with anguish. He did not want to go to court, but the local authorities were already arriving. He explained to them that, with his old age, he did not want any fuss and that he would settle this case in private by renting a cart for them to go and be treated. However, the officers proved to be obstinate.

"You fought so fiercely and seriously injured these two people," they

explained. "You cannot settle this matter privately. You are in Raoyang District, the current magistrate is Mr. Tang. He is an extremely conscientious person. In addition, a few days ago, brigands looted several people on this road, without anyone being able to get hold of them. If we let you go again and Magistrate Tang finds out, he is sure to say that we let the bandits escape and he will hold it against us. There is nothing more to say, we take you to the yamen. Whether you file a lawsuit or settle this matter privately, you will bring it up in court."

Yu Xiulian had already got back into the car. The old guard frowned and looked at Li Mubai.

"In this perspective," the young man told him, "we have no choice but to rely on justice. But don't worry, uncle, we won't run out of arguments to defend ourselves."

"I'm not afraid," retorted old Yu, "but I don't want to be in trouble."

The old guard looked extremely upset. Li Mubai did not have time to ask him the reasons for the enmity between him and these three individuals.

Quickly, the local authorities had a cart drawn by oxen harnessed and installed the two wounded there. They took care of their mount and their saber, and asked a few passers-by to accompany them to serve as witnesses. Old Yu and Li Mubai got back on their horses. The cart Xiulian and her mother were in followed, and they all headed northwest.

After ten li, they arrived at the capital of Raoyang district. They entered the city and went straight to court. Representatives of the local authorities called guards to help the two injured get out of the cart and asked them to guide old guard Yu and his family, as well as the various witnesses. The magistrate appeared shortly after in the great hall for questioning. As soon as the old guard caught sight of his rapacious gaze, he knew he was dealing with someone terrible. Without waiting, the magistrate began by asking for names. Old Yu was thus able to know the name of the tall man. His name was Zeng Debao. The young woman was He Feilong's daughter, He Jian'e, nicknamed "the Demon." The magistrate



questioned old Yu:

"What enmity binds you to these men so that they will hunt you down and want your death?"

"To live, I was a bodyguard," explained the old man. "I frequently escorted convoys and traveled through many areas. If it happened that bandits attacked us, we defended ourselves. I have inevitably killed and injured more than one, becoming an enemy to the survivors and their families. As to exactly what vengeance these individuals are claiming for, I cannot say."

It was the turn of the two wounded to be questioned. According to Zeng Debao's words, the old guard killed his master He Feilong and his hatred would flow from there. He Jian'e was silent. If she revealed her father's story, it would be enough to prove that she was the daughter of a bandit, which would not harm old Yu in any way but herself. However, she ends up exclaiming in fury:

"Excellency, you don't need to ask for more details. In Jianghu, blood debt is inevitable and revenge is plentiful. But I do know that my father was murdered by Yu Xiongyuan. It was seven or eight years ago, I was still a child and don't know any more. I started practicing martial arts because I always wanted to avenge it. Together with my brother, He Qihu, and my late father's disciple Zeng Debao, we went to Julu to end Yu Xiongyuan. Only he had heard of our coming and had already fled with his family. We chased them for several days and had just caught up with them earlier. We could have easily killed Yu Xiongyuan, but this man arrived... "

The young woman then pointed to Li Mubai. Her savagery could be read on her face and it seemed like she was on the verge of rushing at him to kill him.

"Without his intervention," she continued, "we would have already accomplished our revenge. We might be able to spare old Yu, but you, we'll never forgive you!"

Li Mubai watched her, hinting at a sarcastic smile. The magistrate questioned him. Li Mubai explained that he was from Nangong and

was going to Beijing to see a relative. As he walked, he had come across these two individuals as well as a third thief who had fled; they had blocked old Yu and assaulted him. Indignant, he had drawn his sword to lend him a hand. They did not reside in the same district, but he and old guard Yu knew each other a little. He was completely unaware of this revenge affair, however. The magistrate ends up questioning the witnesses present during the confrontation. They all claimed that old Yu was walking quietly when the three horsemen rushed in. Without saying a word, they had drawn their sabers to attack them. Old Yu and his daughter retaliated by pulling out theirs. Li Mubai did not actually arrive until after. The magistrate listened, nodding his head, then addressed the two wounded:

"In this matter you cannot deny that you are acting like bandits. Although they hurt you, I do not condemn them, pleading in self defense."

After the verdict, the assembly could withdraw from the tribunal and the two injured were to be taken to prison. Old Yu respectfully greeted the magistrate to thank him. As all were about to leave, the Demoness sprang up, grabbed an inkwell from a table and threw it at the magistrate. Instinctively, he leaned down and the ink stone crashed to the ground. The guards came running from all sides to grab the young woman, hitting her with sticks and shackling her. The Demon was screaming and cursing, while kicking the courtroom tables over. The magistrate, stayed aside, called the guards pointing to the enraged Demoness. She did not calm down and ten guards could not control her. Others finally came running and managed to keep her down. The caning redoubled and they put chains on her feet. Then, along with Zeng Debao, they took her to prison and everyone left the court.

In front of the main gate of the courthouse, old Yu and Li Mubai exchanged a few courtesies with the witnesses and thanked them before they left. The old guard begged his wife and daughter to get in the cart, then addressed Li Mubai:

"The magistrate allowed us to withdraw but obliges us to stay a few days here and that risks delaying you, dear nephew!"

"I have nothing very urgent, I can stay a few days here. Let's go find an inn nearby, you need to rest a bit, uncle."

As they got into the saddle, several men stepped out of the yamen. Two of them wore official clothes. One was dressed in a purple dress and a black satin waistcoat matched with a small headdress of the same color. With white face and neck, with small eyes, he looked like a son of a wealthy family. Two other men, probably guards in his service, were also very elegant. Two yamen guards, who were escorting these men, opened wide eyes when they saw old Yu leaving, and hailed him as they went to meet him:

"Hey! Where are you going like this?"

"We thought we would find an inn in town where we could rest," answered old Yu, "because we must remain at the disposal of the magistrate."

"You don't have to look for a hostel yourself, otherwise how will we find you?"

"Well," replied old Yu, "could you point us to one?"

The man from a wealthy family had approached. He drew the curtain of the carriage and cocked his head to look inside. Young Yu took refuge in the back of the vehicle, in her mother's arms. The man blinked his small eyes and smiled. The old guard and Li Mubai were furious at this behavior but did not dare to get carried away, not knowing who they were dealing with. Old Yu said to him with a false smile:

"It's my wife and my daughter in the cart."

The man nodded and lowered the curtain without saying anything.

"On the way," one of the guards exclaimed, "I'll find you an inn."

The old man and Li Mubai drew their horses and followed suit as the two guards headed east. The cart followed behind and Li Mubai kept turning around to glance at the wealthy man who remained in court. He was discussing with his two guards while staring at the cart where the young girl was. Li Mubai was furious and said to

himself, "It must be trying for a young girl who grows up and becomes beautiful, because you meet these kind of hateful men everywhere!"

The guards took them to the Fushan Inn. The old man moved into a large bedroom, while Li Mubai settled for a small one; he began to unload the luggage.

Old Yu then took out two pieces of silver which he gave privately to the two guards:

"You will buy yourself a little alcohol with it!"

The two men pocketed the coins; their faces immediately changed expression.

"Grandpa," said one of them, "you don't have to be so generous!"

"Do not worry about the trial, comforted the other, in this story you are the victim and they are the bandits. Today, during the judgment, the young woman attacked the magistrate; he will treat them very severely. The matter is settled, there will be no further meeting. Tomorrow, the magistrate will probably ask you to go to court and let you go."

"Well," agreed old Yu, "you will warn us, gentlemen!"

The two guards took their leave. Yu Xiulian and his mother settled on the kang.

"Daddy," exclaimed the young girl, "come and have a rest! There is nothing to worry about now!"

"I am neither worried nor tired. I'm going to see Lord Li and have a chat," he replied as he left the room.

As Li Mubai had allowed himself to ask for the hand of the young Xiulian not long before, to avoid any suspicion, he had not gone to the room of the old guard but had gone directly to his, and had deposited his precious sword and his luggage on the kang. He asked one of the employees to brew a teapot for him and rested for a moment, sitting on a stool. The old guard entered at this point. Li

Mubai straightened up immediately.

"Don't move, dear nephew," he told him, sitting down facing him. "This affair today was most unexpected, luckily we met you. Without your help, Xiulian and I would have suffered the cruelty of these three individuals!"

"But no but no! Only the young woman is really fierce. The other two do not come close to your ankle, nor that of Xiulian!" Li Mubai exclaimed.

"This young woman is the daughter of a famous bandit from Henan," continued old Yu. "He was known about ten years ago and was called He Feilong of the Precious Sabers. His daughter's name is He Jian'e, known as the Demoness, and I learned that she was married to Zhang Yujin, nicknamed the Golden Spear. In recent years, Zhang Yujin has proven to be the most valiant and best known of the Shanyu and the Two Huai men (46). If he learns that we have injured and imprisoned his wife, you can be sure that he will not stop there, we must expect retaliation!"

Li Mubai was stunned by these words. Zhang Yujin was currently the most prestigious and feared man in Jianghu, few people ignored this great name. He suddenly realized that he had become his enemy. But, in no way impressed, he said with a smile:

"Your nephew is not a boast, but if this Zhang Yujin seeks me, I will break his spear!"

The young man then questioned old Yu about the origin of this hatred that the He family had for him.

The old guard could only sigh for a long time. He began by recounting the friendship which had bound him in his youth to He Feilong, then he spoke of the act committed by the latter in Beijing and of his escape to Henan where he became a bandit. After making his fortune, He Feilong established himself in Weihui's government and called himself He Wenliang, but his conduct did not change; Six or seven years ago he attacked one of his convoys, kidnapping and detaining in the mountains the wife of the official he was escorting. When he learned of it, he was enraged, he went to Weihui's

government to meet with He Feilong. Against all expectations, the latter acted as if he had never known him; they then came to blows. Out of indignation and driven by anger, he killed He Feilong. He then returned to Julu. Assailed with remorse.

On the first moon, he heard that He Feilong's two sons had become men, had studied martial arts, and that his violent-tempered daughter had been married to Zhang Yujin. They were determined to avenge their father and planned to kill him within the next three months. He therefore remained on his guard.

During Qingming, he had taken his wife and daughter to the ancestors' graves, and indeed, on the way back, they had come across four individuals; among them was the man with the purplish face who had fled today. All arms brandished, they attacked them. Luckily, Xiulian had grabbed one of their swords and put them to flight. After this incident, he redoubled his vigilance.

A few days earlier, Yu Tianjie, the disciple of one of his brothers in arms, informed him that Zhang Yujin and one of He Feilong's sons, He Qihu, along with several friends from Jianghu, had left Weihui's government and had set out for Julu. Having no chance of dissuading these men who would be ruthless, he had abandoned his home and led, at first, his wife and daughter to a friend living in the Baoding government to take shelter for some time. He didn't expect to be caught up on the way.

At this point in the story, old Yu exhaled long sighs.

"I am old now," he continued, "it has been a long time since I last walked the Jianghu and I don't have many friends there. Not to mention my wife and my daughter who are under my responsibility. If I were young, I wouldn't be afraid of them and, believe me, I wouldn't hesitate to face them!"

Li Mubai watched old Yu, with his beard and hair all white. Now he was being harassed, and Li Mubai felt compassion for this great hero. Because of what had happened a few months ago, Li Mubai didn't want to sound too familiar with the old man, but tried to comfort him.

"Uncle," he said, "don't worry anymore. Now the Demoness is imprisoned, it is the business of justice. Twice they tried to get revenge, and twice they failed. They must certainly be shaking with fear and being completely disillusioned by now. Today, they know that you do not let it go and will not dare to get you into trouble again. When this matter is settled, I will leave for Beijing. If afterwards my uncle still encounters some difficulties, let him warn me, I will do everything to help him."

Old Yu nodded while sighing. He seemed to want to say something to him again, but fell silent. He sat there for a while then returned to his room.

Soon after, old Yu asked for dinner to be served. Lady Yu was very distressed and did not seem in the mood to eat. This time, she had been very scared, which had triggered the relapse of an old disease. Old Yu was saddened and worried to see her like this. Lying on the kang, she was gently massaging the pit of her stomach.

At that moment, a man burst into the room. Old Yu recognized one of the guards who had led them to the inn that day. He straightened up, surprised, and asked him to sit down:

"Big brother," exclaimed old Yu, "what's the news?"

"Grandpa, don't call me that," he said reverently and with a smile. Don't worry about the trial. The magistrate spares old people and feels compassion for the poorest. He's sending me to tell you not to worry and that everything will be fine. In two or three days, the two bandits will be convicted and you will be able to leave.

"Thank the magistrate infinitely for watching over us in this way; later, we will bow down to the ground in front of him!"

While chatting, the guard watched young Xiulian. He ends up saying with a smile:

"Your lady and your daughter have been shaken!"

"My daughter is too young to know what fear is; but my wife..." he said with a soft sigh, "her stomach pains reappeared."

"How old is your daughter?" the guard then asked.

"Seventeen years."

"She's not engaged yet?"

"The marriage has been concluded for a long time!" Exclaimed old Yu.

The guard looked disappointed. As if he didn't believe it, he insisted:

"That's not what I meant, if the girl is not yet engaged, I can introduce someone to her; he is the son of the magistrate. He's twenty-seven this year, he's a very elegant and cultured person. He was already married ten years ago, but he still does not have children. The magistrate is impatient to have a grandson, and has long wanted to arrange another marriage for his son, but it never suits him. Today in the hall the magistrate saw your daughter, whom he found charming and discussed it with his son. This one is very enthusiastic, that's why they send me here to propose the marriage to you. You must consent to this, because not only will the trial be smoothly arranged, but in addition, you will be linked to a wealthy family and become the step-parent of a magistrate. He also specifies that he will take care of the ceremony and all the gifts."

The guard watched old Yu as he awaited his response. The young Xiulian, sitting on the kang, both ashamed and indignant, kept her head bowed. Old Yu contained his rage and said with a pale smile:

"Go tell the magistrate that I know how to appreciate the favors granted to me, but that my daughter has been promised to someone for a long time already, and that in no case will I accept his proposal!"

At this answer, the guard grimaced:

"Don't get me wrong, Grandpa," he said. "The magistrate is really sincere and serious. Your daughter, when she goes to her son, will be well treated. It will be almost like an official wedding, and although being the second wife, she will always be more than a



simple concubine."

Old Yu, who until now had restrained his anger, was at the end of his patience and knocked on the table:

"Why do you insist! My daughter is already married to someone and I have never heard that a young girl can go to two families!"

The guard changed his expression and forced himself to smile. There was a malicious expression in that smile. The man warned him:

"From now on, no matter what, you are going to have to crawl in front of the magistrate or else this trial may well put you in jail!"

The old man retorted, furious, with an icy smile:

"And why not the death penalty, while you're at it!"

The young Xiulian spoke:

"Dad, don't get angry. There are words you should say calmly!"

"You understood me correctly," he cried, "tapping once more on the table. Who does this magistrate take me for? I, Yu Xiongyuan, have traveled the Jianghu all my life; my family has never had anything to be ashamed of. It is unthinkable that, when I become old, I find myself bullied in this way! He Feilong's children have already forced me to leave my home and give up my property. I find myself wandering away from home in old age! Without speaking now of this magistrate, what a scoundrel! My daughter is already related to the Meng family, and I, noble Yu Xiongyuan, refuse to let her become a concubine!"

Old Yu was exhausted and Xiulian had burst into tears; her mother, also in tears, exclaimed:

"Coming here, we have been harassed by so many people; it would be better if the three of us were dead!"

Facing exasperated Yu Xiongyuan, the man was afraid of receiving a blow and slipped away. Old Yu then sat down and couldn't

contain his tears any longer.

Li Mubai, alerted by the sounds of an argument, arrived in the room. Old Yu, his wife, and young Xiulian were all in tears. The young man asked them what had happened and the old Yu explained that one of the guards of the yamen had come to tell him that the magistrate wanted to forcibly marry Xiulian to his son to make him one of his concubines. The guard had not hesitated to utter threats. Old Yu kept sighing and complaining about his old age and the fate that gripped him. Li Mubai sighed too. Having seen Xiulian sitting on the kang, who turned her face away to cry, he was all the more distressed and tried to appease old Yu who, indignantly, punched the table with his fist.

"In my youth, I, Yu Xiongyuan, was an irascible and violent person. No one ever dared to humiliate me. In a state of anger, I killed my friend He Feilong with my own hands and now suffer the consequences. After closing my escort agency, I learned not to get carried away and I knew how to stay in my place, avoiding any quarrels; and now it happens to me! Although I am old, he continued, I still know how to use my sword and I have not forgotten anything about martial arts; if I am forced to do anything, I will still be able to defend myself at the risk of my life!"

"Uncle, don't get upset like that," Li Mubai advised him. "You are going to worry my aunt and the young lady. For now I am by your side, and if there is to be a final fight, it will be up to me to fight; there is no question that I will let you fight against them!"

"How could I involve you in this? The future is in front of you; I'm already sad to have delayed you here for several days!"

Li Mubai was silent for a moment, then gave him a few more recommendations before retiring to his room. This unfair situation suffered by Yu Xiongyuan and his daughter outraged him. If new incidents arose, young Xiulian could deal with them, but it would be more complicated for Lady Yu, who looked really ill. Li Mubai kept thinking about this painful situation. After dinner he went to bed early.

The next day, Li Mubai went at dawn to the area of the court to

gather information on the trial and on a possible verdict. For a while, he paced the yamen door, not knowing where to turn to do the best. He ended up strolling casually down the main street heading west. He saw a rather busy tea house and decided to go there. He found an open place; a boy made him a teapot and brought him a bowl. Li Mubai poured himself tea and began to drink in small sips, listening to the various conversations of the customers of the tea house. It was about yesterday's trial. Bandits had been arrested: a very aggressive man and woman. She had turned the courtroom upside down, nearly offending the magistrate.

## Chapter 6

*The old man is thrown into prison,*

*One day is enough to weaken his poor life;*

*The journey to lead the girl to marry is trying,*

*A thousand roads later, the tender feelings persist.*

Li Mubai sat at the tea house for a while and tried to gather information about the trial verdict. Most of the customers knew about the case, but only remembered the imprisonment of the bandits. As to how the magistrate planned to punish them, not a single one knew. Listening to two men talking about another case at the next table, Li Mubai understood their implication; although they did not allow themselves to openly insult him, their tone made it clear that Magistrate Tang was not much appreciated. Li Mubai thought back to old Yu who had offended him the day before, and thought to himself that if the Demoness had cunning and accused him falsely, it would cause complications for the trial, to his disadvantage. He was seized with concern.

After a while he left the tea house. Going east along the street, he returned to the Fushan Inn. No sooner had he passed the door than the owner exclaimed:

"Ah! Here you are! Quickly go to Lord Yu's room! He has just been taken away by yamen guards with chains on his wrists!"

Stunned, Li Mubai walked inside and started to blame himself: "As I feared, this Tang is really the most poisonous!"

Arrived in front of the bedroom door, the young man listened to the interior; mother and daughter were crying tragically. It saddened him and infuriated him all at the same time. He coughed before entering the room. Sitting on the kang, Xiulian was crying bitterly; her mother, lying down, who already could not get up, was also crying while complaining of her pains in the pit of her stomach.

Normally, Li Mubai would never have had the nerve to address the young Xiulian directly; but given the circumstances, no matter what the conventions, he frowned and said:

"Young girl, how is it that my uncle Yu got taken away by order of the magistrate?"

Xiulian, in tears, with the hair of her temples all disheveled, looked sad, like a peach blossom after the downpour. Wiping her tears with her handkerchief, she replied:

"Big brother Li, quickly go to the yamen to see my father!" Two guards have just put the chains on him and taken him away, no doubt because of yesterday's incident, when he offended the magistrate!"

"Don't worry," said Li Mubai, "I'm going to the yamen to find out!"

He turned on his heel and left. His heart would explode in anger. "The magistrate is 'the father and mother' of the people (47), he thought. He eats with the salary of the imperial government, he has to distinguish the true from the false and to love the people as his own. Magistrate Tang, because a father refuses him his daughter for his son, throws him in prison. This kind of unjust and greedy official is against the law of Heaven!"

Li Mubai was exasperated when he arrived at the yamen. In front of the main entrance stood six or seven imposing-looking guards, moving people who had nothing to do near the courthouse. Li Mubai stepped forward and folded his hands to greet one of the guards:

"Sorry, big brother, an old man named Yu and staying at the Fushan Inn has just been brought here. Can I come in and see him?"

The guard recognized Li Mubai, who had appeared at the trial the day before. Seeing that the young man was elegantly dressed, he thought to himself that he would no doubt be ready to shell out a few coins. Looking at him out of the corner of his eye, he said to him coldly:

"We are not aware. Go ask the prison!"

Li Mubai greeted him to thank him and walked into the yamen. The prison was located in the south wing. Li Mubai stepped into it and saw that the room was split in two. At the back were about ten people discussing or dealing with administrative tasks. Li Mubai, not daring to enter, remained standing in the first room. An official arrived:

"What do you want?" he questioned him sternly.

"An old friend of my family, my uncle Yu Xiongyuan, was just brought here," he said with a smile. "I would have liked to see him after he appeared in court. Please accept this modest gift," he said at last, handing him a piece of silver.

The official accepted it and slipped it up his sleeve. He immediately became more amiable.

"What is your name?"

"My name is Li and I arrived with my uncle Yu."

"I know," he replied with a nod, "didn't you stand on trial yesterday?"

"That's right."

The official looked up and thought for a moment before continuing:

"Your case is closed now, we are no longer holding you. For your uncle, it's different, we take from the mouth of the young thief that in the past he would have been a big Jianghu bandit, and the magistrate had him arrested. Only, without proof, I think he will stay at most a few days in prison before being released."

"If he stays in prison, can we bring him food?"

"Of course, and I can also personally take care of mediating with the prison guards, only you will have to pay a few coins."

"Money won't be a problem," Li Mubai replied, extracting a silver

bar and putting it into the official's hands.

"Be quiet," exclaimed the latter quite simply, smiling. "You can wait for it here. In a little while judgment will be rendered and I will call someone to take you to him."

Li Mubai thanked him with folded hands, and took a seat on a bench next to him. The official returned to the back room. Without interruption people entered the room to inquire about a case or solicit the benevolence of officials, and not one left without having paid a few coins. "These small sums will turn into a big one," Li Mubai thought, "the officials of this yamen have allowed themselves to be bribed and take bribes, and especially this Department of Sentences, it seems to me. Later, if I go to Beijing and my uncle offers me a job in this ministry, how can I behave like this?"

Shortly after, the official who had accepted the money left the room and returned with a guard. He called out to Li Mubai:

"If you want to meet Yu, follow this man."

They went straight to the prison.

Old Yu's appearance was over and he had just been escorted there. Seeing him chained through the iron bars, Li Mubai let out a few tears. Old Yu didn't seem particularly distressed and said looking at Li Mubai:

"My dear nephew, you see, I have lived over sixty years, not once in my whole life have I broken the law; who would have thought that someone is sentencing me to jail! It's good that you came, I don't have to worry about this trial. This magistrate wanted to force the Demoness to accuse me falsely and to make her say that I was a bandit once. But the Demoness and this Zeng are people of Jianghu and have remained loyal. They know that I have been a decent person all my life. Earlier in court, they did say that they wanted revenge by killing me, and that if they couldn't, other people would. But in no case could they bring false accusations against me."

Li Mubai was momentarily reassured, but continued:

"Since there is no proof or witness, why is the magistrate still detaining my uncle?"

"He wants to leave me in prison," sneered old Yu, "what to do? In short, at this point, I can't bring myself to give him my daughter, so I have to give him money. Fortunately, when I left home I took over four hundred liang of silver. Go back to Xiulian and tell her you need them, and you will advocate for me to treat me well in prison and release me quickly. You will come and bring me something to eat every day, and as long as they don't let me languish in prison, I'll hold on, otherwise... "

Old Yu gritted his teeth and had a terrible look. He didn't say another word and Li Mubai tried to comfort him:

"There's nothing to worry about now, uncle. Hopefully you will be released within two or three days."

"When I get out of prison," said old Yu at last in a sad voice and his eyes full of tears, "I'm afraid I won't live very long! Take good care of Xiulian and her mom!"

Li Mubai let down bitter tears. He was still comforting the old man when the guard suddenly burst in.

"Good, good," he exclaimed, "have you finished speaking? Such an old man must be allowed to rest. You better go and find a way to get him out. Just talking doesn't mean anything!"

Li Mubai could only say goodbye to old Yu. He remained preoccupied all the way back to the hostel. He summed up his meeting to Xiulian and her mother, who couldn't hold back their tears. Li Mubai noticed that Lady Yu, still bedridden, had appealed to the keeper to find her a doctor. The latter had auscultated her and prescribed a decoction of medicinal plants. Xiulian had also borrowed a small stove of loess from the innkeeper to prepare the remedy in the room.

Li Mubai then begged the latter to have two dishes prepared which he would later bring to old Yu, then returned to his room. He lay down on the kang to rest. He thought about how little money he



had left and realized that he would never have enough to bribe the officials. However, he could not bring himself to tell Yu Xiongyuan's wife about it. He figured he could sell his mount and get thirty to forty liang of silver out of it, which he would distribute in the prison. After he brought the meal to Yu Xiongyuan, he would go to the horse store to inquire.

After a brief moment of rest, Li Mubai heard someone cough lightly at his window. The young man straightened up and opened the door to the young Xiulian. For the past two days, Li Mubai kept passing the young girl but never dared to look her in the eyes. Xiulian looked bad. She was wearing a light silk top and black cloth trousers. Her hair was not combed and her face was not painted. She was still lovely, though, but not as resplendent as that spring day when, for the first time, he had seen her at Changchun temple in Julu.

The young girl had not wiped away her tears. She held in her hands a package that seemed to weigh her weight, which she put on the table before addressing Li Mubai:

"Here are four envelopes of silver, there must be two hundred liang or so. Now that my father is in prison, we will have to bribe the yamen people to take care of him. I think my older brother Li doesn't have such a large sum, and I bring this to him.

"Earlier, my uncle told me to ask you. Indeed, I do not have this amount. I thought I would ask you for this money when I came to see you just now, but I couldn't."

"Big brother Li," she sighed softly, "you are really too polite. This matter concerns us, how could we ask you to pay for us? Especially since we still have four to five hundred liang of silver... If we had not met you on the way, who could say what we would be reduced to now? This story delayed you on your trip to Beijing and it distresses us immensely!"

Fine tears, like a string of pearls, flowed down the cheeks of the young girl. Li Mubai lowered his head.

Then Xiulian said:

"I would like to go to the yamen to bring the meal to my father, what do you think, big brother?"

Li Mubai thought about it and answered hesitantly:

"Don't feel like you have to go! The yamen is not very frequentable, I do not think that is very wise."

Xiulian understood that if Li Mubai did not want her to go to the yamen, it was because he feared that she would meet Magistrate Tang's son, and that this was the cause of the incidents.

"So everything depends on you, big brother," she continued, "and on the trouble you give yourself! Right now, I'm really worried that my dad will get sick in prison. He is too old, the days are too hot, how will he be able to stand it?"

As she spoke, she hid her face with her hands to cry bitter tears. Li Mubai wiped his eyes with his sleeve and continued:

"Young girl, don't be upset, being unhappy is useless. For now, watch over your mother and take care of the officials; I think in a day or two your father will be released."

Xiulian nodded and went back to her room.

Li Mubai was heartbroken. I'm really unlucky, he thought, Xiulian doesn't seem to think badly of me. I think old Yu would gladly marry her to me if only she wasn't already engaged. Now, if old Yu broke his engagement with the Meng family, I couldn't marry Xiulian either. Indeed, I would pass for a crummy who helped them and did everything to please them, in order to obtain this marriage in exchange! I had better let go of this unreasonable passion I have for Xiulian, and try to get old Yu out of prison as quickly as possible, so that I can resume my way to the capital or lead a wandering life on the other side of the world. Reluctantly abandoning this painful and unique story of my life."

Soon after, an employee of the hostel served the meal to Li Mubai. The latter asked him if the other dishes he had asked for were ready. They were and he hurried to finish eating. He provided

himself with a silver envelope, put the others away, begged the innkeeper to find a young boy to carry him the basket of food, and went to the yamen.

In the prison, after old Yu had finished his meal, Li Mubai argued with the guard, to whom he handed two liang of silver, asking him to take good care of the old man. He then looked for the official he had met in the morning. The latter had already finished work and had returned home, but he had left a message saying that in case of problems, not to hesitate to come and see him.

Without delay, a young employee of the yamen took him to the official, who did not live far away. The latter, who guessed his intentions, was very polite. Li Mubai told him of his decision to pay out a large sum, one hundred to two hundred liang of silver, to allow old Yu to get out of it quickly. The official, very interested, made all kinds of promises to him and told him that in two or three days old Yu would certainly be released. Li Mubai left him ten liang and took his leave. Back at the inn, he summed up the situation to the young Xiulian, who was somewhat reassured.

Magistrate Tang, furious that old Yu had refused his marriage proposal, had him thrown in prison without a specific charge. The official acted as intermediary for Li Mubai, who eventually disbursed 150 liang of money; one hundred liang were for the magistrate, the official had thirty liang, and twenty liang were divided equally between the prison guards and the yamen guards. Three days later, old Yu was released.

While in prison, Li Mubai brought him food every day, and the guards who had been bribed were not too harsh on him; however, the dirtiness of the cell and the stifling heat of the days had only increased his anger. The three days of detention seemed to have aged him by three years. Old Yu looked diminished. On the way, he found it difficult to muster his strength to return to the inn. At the beginning of the afternoon, he urged his daughter to collect things because they were on their way immediately.

Li Mubai entered their room at this time: He saw Lady Yu lying on the kang, still unable to get up.

"Uncle, the matter is settled, so stay at the inn for a few days, what's the point in being in such a hurry? Your wife is not yet well, and then you've just been released, you should rest someday."

"Dear nephew," he sighed, "if you only knew!... First of all, I don't want to stay here. If I stay even one more day, I think I'll go crazy. Second..."

Old Yu calmed down and resumed:

"In prison, I learned that the Demoness and Zeng Debao were convicted of theft. I also heard that individuals came to see them and brought them ointment for stab wounds.

"It's strange," Li Mubai wondered, "could it be that they have friends in the area?"

"No, they are from Henan, it seems unlikely that they have any knowledge here. Only you have to realize that, since they come from so far to get revenge, they certainly did not come in two or three, the others are hiding somewhere. They also shelled out a lot of money, so what's going to happen now? The Demoness and Zeng Debao will soon be released as well. If I don't leave this place, trouble will befall me again!"

Li Mubai found his words to be quite sensible. He took out the rest of the money he hadn't used and put it on the table.

"Dear nephew," exclaimed old Yu, "this case has delayed you for several days and certainly cost you money, keep this sum as compensation. How can I get it back? Especially since I still have two to three hundred liang left!

"It is out of the question," replied Li Mubai. "Later, if I don't have any money, I'll come and borrow some from you!"

"Dear nephew, sighed the old man tragically, let's say goodbye, who knows if we can meet again one day!"

"Uncle," said Li Mubai, frowning, "how can you say such things? If you are worried about this trip, I may not go to Beijing for the moment and accompany you to Baoding; luckily, that doesn't make

me a big detour."

"It won't be worth it, it will be fine. Besides, I no longer intend to go to Baoding!"

Li Mubai was even more surprised at this response. Old Yu said to him, bulging his chest:

"I'm old and can't predict what's going to happen, but as long as I have one breath of life, I'll stand up for myself. This Demoness and this He Qihu will not necessarily be the strongest. But that my problems delay the promising future of a young man, that is what saddens me!"

Li Mubai did not know what to answer.

The young girl had finished preparing things. An employee of the inn reported that the horse and team were ready. Old Yu paid his bill, along with Li Mubai's, while Xiulian supported his mother to get into the car. Old Yu picked up his horse, pulling it by the bridle. He turned to Li Mubai:

"Nephew," he said to him, "stay here to rest again. We will meet again, I will visit you in Beijing!"

"Have a good trip, uncle!" Li Mubai replied greeting him with folded hands.

Xiulian, who had just raised the curtain of the carriage, addressed him, her eyes full of gratitude:

"Goodbye, big brother Li!"

Hearing the young girl, Li Mubai felt overwhelmed.

Old Yu clung to the saddle and tried to pull himself up, but the few days in prison had weakened him and he almost fell. A frightened Xiulian exclaimed:

"Go easy daddy! Do not fall!"

Fortunately, Li Mubai, at his side, had done his best to support him,

and old Yu eventually got into the saddle, out of breath. His complexion was pale as paper and his thin beard was quivering. Li Mubai couldn't help but frown, he was really afraid that something might happen to him and that he couldn't pass the city gates. But old Yu was stubborn and he called out "On the way!" To the driver. The horse followed suit and they headed west, towards the city gate.

Li Mubai stood in front of the entrance, completely disoriented. No longer seeing them in the distance, he returned to the inn as if he had lost everything. In his room, he sat for a long time, dejected. Suddenly thinking back to old Yu's words and demeanor, he was afraid for them. If on the way old Yu was chased by the Demon's companions or if he fell ill, what would happen to young Xiulian? Worried, he decided to follow them in secret to protect them; at the slightest incident, he could help them. He quickly packed his things and, when his horse was ready, he left the inn towards the west gate.

He stopped on the outskirts of the city and looked around. A green ocean of seedlings of grain lay before him as far as the eye could see, but he saw no trace of old Yu's cart or horse. The young man remembered that, when he left, old Yu had made it clear that he no longer intended to go to Baoding. "Where can he go then?" The He family's revenge prevents him from returning to his home in Julu. Whatever, I just have to follow the road north. He whipped his horse and galloped in that direction.

It was a blazing sun, without the slightest breeze. The thick shoots of wheat and sorghum stood still in the fields. After ten li, Li Mubai and his horse were sweating profusely. He continued to advance and came to the edge of a wood. Several people were resting under the trees and there was even a small traveling merchant who offered a thirst-quenching drink made from sour plum. Li Mubai tied his horse to a tree and bought a bowl. Refreshed, he sat down on the ground. He wiped his face with a towel and fan himself from his straw hat. The cicadas were singing over the junipers and the people beside him were chatting to each other. Li Mubai addressed the merchant:

"Have you seen an old man on a horse accompanying a cart pulled

by mules?"

"Indeed, there is an old man on a horse who has passed. The convoy did not stop, they looked in a hurry."

"Were they going north?"

"Yes, agreed the merchant. But I'm afraid they're now about twenty lis."

Li Mubai wondered why old Yu was walking so fast. Not wanting to waste time, he got back in the saddle and continued north. He rode in one go until nightfall. Still not seeing any trace of old Yu, he felt slightly discouraged and was afraid he had taken the wrong path. After browsing a few more lis, he found an inn for the night.

The next day at dawn, Li Mubai decided to continue on his way to the capital without ceasing to worry about old Yu. As he walked north, he inquired of passers-by. Against all expectations, a person told him that he had met an old man on horseback accompanied by a cart very early in the morning. Li Mubai quickened his pace.

Around noon, on the wide path, passers-by were rare. Li Mubai saw a cart and a horse in the distance: it was Yu Xiongyuan. Delighted, Li Mubai however kept his distance. Under the blazing sun, the old man's convoy made no stop. After seven or eight lis, the sun was beating even harder. Li Mubai was drenched in sweat and his mount was panting, in the same condition. Old Yu's convoy came to a crossroads and disappeared behind the vegetation. Li Mubai hurried to reach the fork and not lose sight of them. He held onto his horse's bridle when he saw them again and hid himself by the side of the path, lest old Yu turn around and see him.

The old man's horse moved slower and slower and fell behind the car, which continued to move forward. Li Mubai lamented, "Not so long ago, Yu Xiongyuan was still a hero, now he is getting old and even struggling to ride a horse. At that moment he saw the old man squeeze his chest with both hands, as if calling out, then roll over on his mount and fall. The horse jumped to the side. Stunned, Li Mubai came running up.

In recent months, old Yu had been overworked; With the fatigue of this long journey and the three days unfairly spent in prison in Raoyang, it was too much for him. On the ground, he spat blood and could not get up. The cart had stopped and Xiulian rushed over. With the carter, she helped her father to sit up. His legs were too weak for him to stand. Xiulian was crying to see him spit like that. Her complexion was livid and her face drawn. His white beard was stained with blood. With his eyes closed, he was panting without a word.

Xiulian held her father in her arms. She was heartbroken, but there was no point in panicking. It was then that she saw Li Mubai arrive. Surprised and nevertheless relieved, she shouted at him:

"Big brother, come quickly! My father is not well!"

"Don't worry," he replied, dismounting.

Li Mubai crouched down and grabbed old Yu by the waist. The young girl freed herself and, on her knees, began to cry desperately: "Daddy! Dad!" Old Yu, who was slowly catching his breath, opened his eyes slightly to see his daughter. Then he saw Li Mubai and felt like relief. He says :

"Luckily you're here my nephew!"

"I was not at ease letting you go like this and I hurried to catch up with you. Don't worry, uncle, I don't think it's too big a deal, it must be hot, rather, but we have to find a place for you to rest."

Dame Yu had also ended up getting out of the cart and, seeing the state of her husband, began to cry bitterly. Li Mubai inquired from the nearest village carter.

"If we go down again in that direction for two or three lis, we come to the village of Yushu," he told her.

"Let's go right now and find a hostel. Yu must rest."

Li Mubai and the carter hoisted old Yu into the car. His wife got on the stretcher and Xiulian mounted her father's horse. Li Mubai picked up his and they set off north. Xiulian's sad expression upset



Li Mubai. The deep affection he had for her resurfaced and made his heart tremble.

On the way, the young Xiulian, anxious and distressed, spoke to him:

"It was surely the hassle that made my father sick. If anything else happens, his situation will get worse!"

"It doesn't sound so bad," he told her, frowning, "but he needs to get some rest and see a doctor. In a few days, he will already be better."

Xiulian wiped away her tears with her handkerchief and remained silent. Li Mubai watched her out of the corner of his eye. She rode remarkably well; he was very impressed. Not only does she excel in martial arts, he said to himself, but she also really knows how to ride a horse, it's so rare! I wonder what kind of man her fiancé is. Does the second son of the Meng family have such flawless conduct and such an experienced kung fu? My life is over, he lamented, I'm afraid I will never find such a perfect wife! Li Mubai was disheartened, as if Xiulian had dashed all his hopes and joys. "It's even more painful than if we had never met!" This line came to his mind and the young man felt even more defeated.

The convoy arrived at Yushu village. They found an inn and put old Yu there. Li Mubai asked the innkeeper to send for a doctor quickly. Old Yu was slowly coming to his senses, but from the pallor of his face it was clear that his condition was worsening. He took long breaths and continued to cough up blood. The old man opened his eyes. Beside him, his wife and daughter were crying and Li Mubai standing in front of him looked worried. He felt even more distressed. After a while, Yu Xiongyuan painfully extended his hand to the young man, who quickly grabbed it. Old Yu was holding tight. Breathing with difficulty, he said to him:

"Mubai, I can't thank you enough!"

At these words, Li Mubai shed tears, not finding the words to comfort his old uncle.

Xiulian was desperately crying at her father. The latter looked at

her and said:

"Xiulian, you must consider Li Mubai as your own big brother..."

The young girl nodded while sobbing. Li Mubai wiped away her tears and said:

"Uncle, why be so pessimistic? You will already be better in two days. As for Xiulian, I also consider her to be my own little sister."

Li Mubai was heartbroken, but he tried to hold back his tears. Old Yu opened his mouth again and said weakly:

"I'm afraid this is the end!"

Xiulian burst into tears; her mother was choking on her tears. Li Mubai didn't know who to console first. Old Yu struggled desperately and said:

"I'm dying, no matter where... You'll put me in the ground first. Mubai," he continued, "you absolutely must lead them to the government of Xuanhua!"

Li Mubai had come to understand: if Yu Xiongyuan was taking them north like this, it was not to visit a friend in the Baoding government, but to lead Xiulian to her future family. Li Mubai took advantage of his last breaths of life to speak to him honestly:

"Don't worry, uncle. If you were to really die here, we would perform a temporary funeral, then I would take my aunt and sister to the Meng family. When the mourning period is over, my little sister will be able to get married. Finally, we will return to seek the soul of my uncle to bring it back to the tomb of his ancestors. But don't think you can't get well!"

The old man was reassured by these words and wept in gratitude.

The innkeeper brought back a doctor who auscultated Yu Xiongyuan. He took his pulse, frowning. For him, it was anger that had put him in this state, and he had caught a heat stroke. He prescribed some medicine for him and Xiulian fixed it. Li Mubai accompanied him to the entrance. The doctor said to him:

"The old man's pulse is bad. Let him take the decoctions, if you see that he is better, call me back. If that doesn't change anything, you can start planning for his funeral."

Li Mubai thought his diagnosis was correct, and his recommendations were well founded.

Old Yu might not make it. Xiulian would be very much to be pitied with a deceased father and a sick mother. He could not comfort her and was saddened by it. In the village, he found an herbalist from whom he bought something to prepare the decoction. He returned to the inn and took care of it personally. He then gave it to Xiulian, who gave his father the medicine. Yu Xiongyuan was lying on the kang with his eyes closed. If he wasn't breathing so hard, you might have thought he was dead. Using a fan, Xiulian chased away the flies that wanted to land on him. Lady Yu was sitting on the kang, leaning against the wall. She squeezed her chest, wiping away her tears. Before leaving them, Li Mubai tried to comfort them once again. Then he asked the innkeeper for a room where he went to rest.

During the day, Yu Xiongyuan's condition worsened. The next day he was still coughing up blood, his breath was short and he couldn't even speak. They called back the doctor from the day before, who wrote a new prescription, without much conviction. Xiulian and his mother were devastated, so Li Mubai asked the innkeeper to bring in another doctor. After taking the old man's pulse, he said:

"We can do nothing for him. You can start planning for his funeral."

On the one hand, Li Mubai consoled Xiulian and her mother without showing his immense grief; on the other, he was discussing the preparations with the innkeeper. He had to buy funeral clothes, choose a coffin and find a room in which to place it while awaiting the burial. It took him all day.

In the evening, old Yu's breath became shorter and shorter. Despite everything, he managed to pronounce a few sentences. He did not wish to be avenged, he had to stop stirring up the hatred of the children of He Feilong. He then recommended that Xiulian be a good wife in her future family. Finally, Li Mubai should not be

forgotten for his tremendous help and he clearly insinuated that he regretted having already engaged his daughter. He found Xiulian and Li Mubai to be a really beautiful couple. As he spoke thus, Li Mubai was not by their side and Xiulian felt her sadness redouble as she wished he was there to hear it.

At bedtime, Li Mubai came to see them and noticed Yu Xiongyuan's critical condition: his life was hanging by a thread. The young man then addressed Xiulian:

"I'm afraid we can't do anything for my uncle. Don't worry about the funeral, I took care of everything and the funeral clothes are in my room. I chose a coffin, it is pine and very solid. I also found a suitable place to store the body pending burial; it is a small temple dedicated to the god of war Guandi (48), to the east of the village."

Xiulian was crying hot tears and nodding her head without being able to say a word. Li Mubai sat on the bench next to the young girl who was watching over her father. Lady Yu, on the kang, wept and dozed off at times. From the cup of the oil lamp placed on the table only emanated a faint light, the air in the room was heavy and trying; in adjoining rooms, customers were snoring like the roar of a storm.

Li Mubai remained seated for a while, then he heard the third watch ringing in the distance. Xiulian had her head bowed and looked exhausted. The young man preferred to leave them and returned to his room. He was depressed and heaving deep sighs. He lay down on the kang without taking off his clothes. He was dozing off when he suddenly heard Xiulian and her mother cry bitterly. He got up and went to see them.

Through the door, he heard Xiulian desperately calling for her father and hurried back into the room. Yu Xiongyuan had already breathed his last. Li Mubai cried bitterly. Soon after, he recovered and consoled the mother and daughter. The innkeeper and two employees had also come running. Li Mubai asked the boss to bring in the geomancer and tell the carpenter to bring the coffin. He returned to his room to retrieve the funeral clothes and changed Yu Xiongyuan, helped by the innkeeper. Soon after, the geomancer arrived and wrote the death certificate, and they left Yu Xiongyuan

lying on the kang. His wife and daughter watched over him, weeping until late in the morning. Li Mubai also couldn't sleep that night.

At dawn, the coffin was brought and Yu Xiongyuan was put into a bier, then taken to Guandi temple. The monks recited prayers for the soul of the deceased, then discussed the location of the coffin.

"Behind the temple is a free space," said one of the temple monks, "there are trees and the feng shui (49) is auspicious. Your best bet would be to bury him there, and later if you want to move his soul, that will be easy."

Li Mubai nodded and told Xiulian about it. She didn't know how long she was going to have to stay in Xuanhua before she could come back here to retrieve her father's soul.

"If we could bury him temporarily in this place, it would be better than in the temple, and if we have to spend more, that's okay..."

"It won't be necessary," said Li Mubai.

The affair was thus concluded.

The next day they hired people to dig the pit. Under the desperate tears of Lady Yu and Xiulian, the sturdy escort guard Yu Xiongyuan, the famous hero Eagle with the Iron Wings, was buried behind the wall of the small temple. The tomb was erected, lonely.

The two women burned the paper money there, then they returned to the inn. Xiulian settled all the debts and addressed Li Mubai:

"Big brother, luckily you took care of everything for the funeral and you're here to help us. Without your help, I think my father would have died a long time ago, under the sabers of the He family or in prison. Anyway, we can still say that he had a long life! Big brother," she continued, "if you have to go to Beijing, you don't have to accompany us to Xuanhua. Because of us, you are delaying your career, and that saddens us even more."

Xiulian was sobbing so delicately and talking to him with such a sad, melancholy air that the young man was shocked.

"Don't say that," he replied. "Yu Xiongyuan was a friend of my master and I regarded him as such; I will do my best to honor him. If you want to go alone with your mother to Xuanhua, of course you can. Your kung fu is experienced enough that you can go about any business without being intimidated by anyone. Only a mother and a daughter traveling alone is not suitable. In addition, I am going to Beijing to see a relative, and whether I see him now or later does not matter, there is no rush. Before he died, my uncle begged me to bring you to Xuanhua, and it is only when I have seen Meng and his second son that I will be reassured, having honored my uncle Yu's last wishes. "

Xiulian was both grieved and grateful.

"Asking Li Mubai to accompany us seems wiser to me," said Lady Yu, "if no man comes with us, we may be in trouble."

"In that case, we'll leave tomorrow. Papa is dead now, his horse is no longer of any use to us. Big brother, take care of selling it."

Li Mubai agreed and asked an employee of the inn to take the horse to the market to get an estimate of its value.

It was a very beautiful frame. Old Yu had had it since they left Julu, where he had bought it for two hundred liang of silver. At the market, it was sold for one hundred and sixty liang. Xiulian told Li Mubai to keep this money for the travel expenses to Xuanhua.

They spent the rest of the day resting in the village. The next day, after paying off their debts, they set off to the northwest, Li Mubai still riding his own mount, Xiulian and his mother, in the cart.

Yushu Village came under the authority of Wangdu District. More or less thirty li to the north-west was the capital of this district. They stopped there for lunch and then continued on their way. They left the district, crossed the Wuhui mountain range through the Zijing pass, straight in the direction of Xuanhua.

Li Mubai wanted to arrive quickly at his destination and deposit this beautiful flower so dear to his heart safe and sound in its new environment; that's what she deserved. Deep down he was

inconsolable, because he loved her and knew he couldn't spend his life by her side. Although he was close to her, she belonged to someone else and he didn't dare to be too familiar. He felt no hatred, however, and believed that there was no alternative. He wanted to show his honest and righteous character, however, and was cautious in all situations to avoid suspicion. On the way, for example, he never spoke to Xiulian and in the evening, when they went down to the inns, he systematically asked for two separate rooms.

Lady Yu sometimes felt embarrassed and asked him about his family or asked him if he was engaged. Li Mubai was not very talkative and did not expand on the subject. He only thought of accompanying Xiulian to her in-laws to fulfill old Yu's wish. Then, he could finally go to the four corners of the world, lead a wandering life, never seeing Xiulian or her mother again. What was the point of asking them to think of him? The convoy hardly stopped, moving for seven or eight days in a row in the scorching heat of the northern lands. One afternoon around three o'clock, they passed the ramparts of the capital of Xuanhua government.

## Chapter 7

*Beauty rarely brings happiness,*

*The moon is declining, melancholy;*

*He joins the dreaded pass of the verdant mountains,*

*The rain soothes the knight's heart.*

Along the way, Li Mubai learned from Lady Yu the name of Xiulian's future father-in-law. It was Meng Yongxiang, whose nickname was "Koubei Bear (50)". He had opened an escort agency in Xuanhua's government in his name. He had been protecting merchants trading in the Kouwai region, north of the Great Wall, for almost forty years. His eldest son was called Meng Sichang and was already married; his second son, Meng Sizhao, was Xiulian's fiancé. Both brothers were martial arts experts and helped their father at the agency.

Li Mubai, who was leading the vehicle on his horse, found the Yongxiang escort agency. He quickly realized that this was an important agency. Passing the main gate, they found themselves in an enclosure where more than twenty horses and a few camels were herded. In front of the door sat several fellows on a large bench. Seeing Li Mubai dismount, one of them, in his thirties, with a thin mustache, approached and asked him:

"Who are you looking for?"

"I am sent by Master Yu from the Julu District," replied Li Mubai while greeting him with folded hands. "I am accompanying Lady Yu and her daughter."

"Hey! You have brought them here on the orders of Uncle Yu," resumed the young man, surprised but delighted. "Quickly tell them to get out of the cart!"

The man walked over to the vehicle and saw Lady Yu:



"My aunt, hello! It has been six years since I saw you, you must not recognize me. Hey! Your daughter has grown a lot!"

Dame Yu and Xiulian looked at him intently before finally recognizing him. It was Liu Qing, nicknamed "the Buddha's Little Warrior (51)"; he had worked with Yu Xiongyuan at the escort agency, but when the escort agency closed, he was recommended to Meng Yongxiang. He begged them to get out of the cart and was dumbfounded when he saw that they were in mourning; while inviting them to come inside, he turned to Li Mubai to ask his name.

"My name is Li Mubai," he replied.

"Brother Li," continued Liu Qing in a low voice, "how is Uncle Yu?"

"He has already breathed his last," he replied, still in a low voice.

Liu Qing was saddened, but didn't have time to ask for more details, and showed them the way while wiping his eyes with his sleeve.

The news of their arrival had preceded them. Old guard Meng Yongxiang and his wife were already coming to meet them. As soon as Lady Yu saw Lady Meng, she stepped forward to grab her hand.

"Young sister..." she said to her, bursting into tears.

Lady Meng in turn began to cry bitterly and affectionately took Xiulian's arm. Meng Yongxiang was elated as he came to greet them. Although in thirty years his old friend Yu Xiongyuan had never visited him, he was happy to hear from him. But when he saw his sister-in-law Yu and daughter in mourning, his expression suddenly changed. He begged his wife to support Lady Yu and invited them to come inside. He asked who had driven them; Liu Qing replied:

"It was Lord Li who escorted them here."

With a broad smile, Meng Yongxiang approached to get to know the young man.

"What a long and painful journey," he told him. "What is your

name?"

Li Mubai greeted him and told him his name. Liu Qing next continued:

"He just told me a moment ago that Uncle Yu was no longer in this world."

"What! How?" Meng Yongxiang exclaimed, stamping his foot.

His eyes clouded over and the tears finally fell. Liu Qing also began to cry. Li Mubai was invited to take a seat in the agency room and he was served tea. Old guard Meng wiped away his tears and asked Li Mubai:

"My old friend Yu took care of his health though! He was not yet seventy, what did he die of? What disease?"

"Concern and anger," Li Mubai sighed. "He died on the trip."

Meng Yongxiang and Liu Qing were even more surprised. Without delay, Li Mubai explained how, six or seven years ago, Yu Xiongyuan and He Feilong's family became enemies, and how He Feilong's children wanted to avenge their father's death. "Their first attempt was on the Qingming Festival, when Yu Xiongyuan went with his family to meditate at the graves of his ancestors. They attacked him on the way. Fortunately, his daughter helped him fight them and they managed to put them to flight. Later, Yu Xiongyuan heard that He Feilong's terrifying daughter He Jian'e the Demoness and her husband from Henan, Zhang Yujin, aka the Golden Spear, were coming to pick him up. To avoid another confrontation, Yu Xiongyuan had set out with his family for Xuanhua and thus get Xiulian married. Only, at the border of Raoyang district, he encountered the Demoness accompanied by two men, and they engaged in a fierce fight. At that time, I myself was at this place and got involved. The Demon and one of the men were wounded, the other fled. The local authorities then took us to Raoyang Court, but the magistrate was a greedy and corrupt official, and unexpectedly he held Master Yu prisoner for three days. More than a hundred liang of silver was spent to free him. Yu Xiongyuan was very tormented and very angry, and if we add to

that the fatigue of the journey... Near the village of Yushu, he fell from his horse, then fell ill, never to get up again. In agony, he instructed me to lead his wife and daughter here. After a temporary funeral in Yushu village, So I took them to your house... I am a disciple of Ji Guangjie, he continued, and Yu Xiongyuan thus considered me as his nephew. By leading Lady Yu and Xiulian here, I granted his wish. When Xiulian is no longer in mourning, she can marry the second lord and then take care of bringing her father's dead soul back to Julu. As for me, I have to be in Beijing and I would therefore like to leave tomorrow so as not to be further delayed."

Meng Yongxiang sighed and wiped away his tears.

"It's unimaginable all these mishaps," he said finally. When we were young, Yu Xiongyuan and I were escort guards at the Taixing agency in Beijing. Almost everything I know in kung fu is passed on to me by him. He then returned home to open his own agency; two years later it was my turn. Every year or so, I would go to Julu to visit him because we had agreed to marry our children. Afterwards, he recommended Liu Qing to come here. Liu Qing then explained to me that he had killed He Feilong and was very upset by it, to the point of shutting down his escort agency. He Feilong was also my friend, but the friendship between him and Yu Xiongyuan was much deeper. I never imagined that He Feilong would go wrong, and that the two friends, so old then, would come to this end. I was very saddened. With age, I no longer wanted to go far from home, but I had sent someone to deliver a message to Yu Xiongyuan to comfort him. In recent years, I have regularly sent people to visit him. When they returned, they all told me that he was happy and still in good health. It had been a long time and I had forgotten this affair with He Feilong, and I never imagined that he would have sons, a daughter and a son-in-law who would demand revenge on my old friend Yu. They must undoubtedly be enemies in a previous life! For the past two years," he continued, frowning, "I have also been upset. I would have liked for a long time already to seal the union of our two children, only, last spring, my second son Sizhao left the house."

"Why did your son leave?" Li Mubai asked very surprised.

Meng Yongxiang hesitated a moment before answering, exhaling a long sigh:

"My second son is very intelligent and very proud, he was out of my control. At nine years old, he disappeared. We didn't know where he was and even thought he was dead. Then he reappeared at the age of thirteen. He had actually followed a bunch of thieves. During all these years, he had gone to Mongolia, to the great meander of Huang He (52), living with bandits or soldiers. He had learned martial arts and even knew a few characters. I made him study and his character softened. Every day he revised his martial arts movements, he mastered the saber and the sword very well. I made the decision to marry him within the next five or six years to young Yu. When he was fifteen, he helped me run the escort agency. Then his bellicose character gained the upper hand, he was in fights all the time. He meddled in affairs that did not concern him, spent his money indiscriminately and befriended anyone. As his brother and I severely reprimanded him at the time, he refused to continue living with us. And last spring it caused great misfortune!"

Li Mubai was stunned by this story, and when he heard that this second son was the cause of a disaster, he wanted to know more. Old Meng coughed:

"In Xuanhua's government, there is a very rich man named Zhang Wanqing. One of his uncles is a steward in the Forbidden City and he is more powerful than a Minister of Defense, so even the official dignitaries here dare not anger him."

Zhang Wanqing was quite a handsome man, he had several concubines and even looked after several other women outside his home. In town there was a grocer, old Wu, who had a very beautiful wife. When Zhang Wanqing heard about it, she fell into his hands. Afterwards, old Wu corrected his wife who, ashamed, put an end to her life. Old Wu knew that Zhang Wanqing wouldn't forgive him and ran away, maybe he's dead now. This story is of course dramatic, but has nothing to do with us. Only when my unworthy son Sizhao heard about it, he went to find Zhang Wanqing outside his house, sword in hand, and cut off both of his legs. After having caused this misfortune, he fled I do not know where, without taking the slightest subsidy. Zhang Wanqing did not

succumb to his injuries and did not stop there. He protested to the yamen, and I was almost thrown in jail. I had to shell out four to five hundred liang of silver for the deal to settle down. But my second son will never be able to return to Xuanhua!"

Then old Meng lamented for young Xiulian:

"Young Yu's life is very bitter. Now that her father is dead, she and her mother find themselves at my house, without any support. If my son Meng Sizhao knew how to behave, he would now be home and we could celebrate the wedding. With my old age, I still find myself happy. Despite the insolence of one of my sons, who may be dead by now, I think it is this young Xiulian who is the most to be pitied! Now my old friend Yu is dead and I am so sorry."

Meng Yongxiang wiped away his tears that kept falling. Li Mubai sighed for a long time. On the one hand, he was saddened by Xiulian's bitter fate; on the other, after what Guard Meng had just told him about his son, he could not help but feel respect and admiration for him. He said to himself, "Meng Sizhao masters martial arts and has a fair character, he is a real young knight errant. He is quite worthy of the young Xiulian."

To comfort old Meng, Li Mubai said to him:

"Old uncle, don't be miserable about this story. If one day I meet your son, even if he cannot come back here, I will suggest that he celebrate the marriage with Xiulian in another place.

"What? Don't you think Xiulian could suffer a lot from this marriage? Now that she's home, I'll treat her like my own daughter. She is still young, and within two years, if we are certain of Sizhao's death or if we learn that he has not settled down, I will simply adopt her and find her another fiancé."

Li Mubai did not find this arrangement wise, but, after this first contact, he did not dare to say anything, although he found that the bonds between the Meng and Yu families were not as close as he thought. After a while, old Meng left the room to go and comfort Xiulian and her mother.

Two guards then returned, and Liu Qing introduced Li Mubai to them:

"This is a disciple of Ji Guangjie, his name is Li Mubai and has taken Master Yu's family, the Iron Winged Eagle, to this point. Li Mubai, here are two honorable brothers in arms: Tang Zhenfei and Xu Yuting."

After respectfully greeting each other, we talked about things and others, then the conversation turned to the second lord of the house, Meng Sizhao. Li Mubai listened to them attentively. Sizhao was an expert in martial arts, courageous, with a strong sense of justice, he was truly an honest man. He had a strange character, however, and didn't get along with anyone. Li Mubai expressed the wish that he might one day meet him.

"He has an ordinary face," Xu Yuting explained to him, "rather pale. He's not very big, but his eyes are. He can speak several dialects from different provinces, and also Mongolian."

"As a child, he went as far as Mongolia," continued Li Mubai. "There must be friends, maybe he ran away there?"

"No, no, he's too well known there. We tasked several people who were on their way beyond the Great Wall to inquire about it, but it was to no avail."

Li Mubai then asked about the Master's eldest son, Meng Sichang.

"He is escorting convoys to Guihua town. His character and his kung fu are very different from those of his younger brother," Liu Qing replied.

They chatted for a while longer, then Liu Qing had a room prepared for Li Mubai and invited him to rest there.

After the meal, by the light of the lamp, Li Mubai began to think about Xiulian's fate and was very sorry. He then reflected on his own future and found it just as uncertain. He sighed: the next day he should be on his way again. Hearing the third watch ringing (53), he extinguished the lamp and went to bed. In his dream, he

saw the pale face, but still delicate, of the young Xiulian. Then, in a hazy place, he met a young man who turned out to be Meng Sizhao, her fiancé, who had a knife in his hand full of blood and wanted to kill him. Li Mubai was quick to explain to him that after learning that Xiulian had been promised to him for a long time, he had stopped thinking about her. They had certainly traveled together for several hundred li and gone through many trials, but, in all circumstances, he had respected the proprieties and had spoken to her only when he had been obliged to do so; facing heaven and earth his heart was honest, and if he did not believe it, let him extract it with his dagger to verify! Then he listened to what Meng Sizhao had to say. His words were blurry but he was upset. Meng Sizhao threw down his blade and took his hand to cry bitterly. In the torment of his dream, Li Mubai heard someone call him. He woke up with a start. Opening his eyes, he made out in the half-light a person whispering:

"Big brother Li, big brother Li!"

With a bound he wanted to light, but the person stopped him:

"Big brother Li, don't turn on, it's Xiulian! I just wanna tell you something and I'm off."

Li Mubai came to his senses as he recognized Xiulian in front of him and straightened up.

"What is going on?" he asked her, surprised. Please tell me."

Xiulian didn't speak right away, she was sobbing, then ended up saying:

"This... the fencing master's second son left over a year ago and hasn't reappeared since, do you know?"

"I know it. Meng Sizhao is a generous person, a lover of justice and an expert in martial arts. He fled because he injured a miserable local notable named Zhang Wanqing."

"I heard it wasn't just for that. Apparently, Arms Master Meng didn't really like his second son. It is said that his eldest, Meng Sichang, is

bad and very cruel, and that he wants to monopolize all the wealth of the family. He would have thus pushed his brother to leave!"

Xiulian sobbed again bitterly. Li Mubai gave a long sigh and tried to comfort her:

"Do not worry. Tomorrow I am on my way again, I will try to find Meng Sizhao and, whatever happens, I will try to persuade him to marry you."

Xiulian looked reassured but was still obviously embarrassed. Li Mubai could vaguely see that she was wiping her eyes.

"Now I have no one to lean on anymore," she continued. "We asked you a lot and you gave yourself a lot of trouble."

"You must not be embarrassed with me. I consider you my sister and I will really do my best to find Meng Sizhao."

These words made Xiulian even more miserable and she was about to burst into tears. Xiulian finally told him after a while:

"Big brother, I'll let you rest."

She gently opened the door and left without making a sound.

Alone in the darkness of the room, Li Mubai was assaulted by a thousand feelings. Between Xiulian's unexpected visit and his disturbing dream, he finally let out a small laugh. "But what's happening to me? I am a brave man, how can I behave like this now; my heroism is about to abandon me! Let's forget all that! I must not linger here, tomorrow I will leave without delay. He closed the door propping it up with a chair. Then he took off his clothes and settled down to sleep. In the distance, he heard the ringing of the fourth watch (54). He rolled over on the kang without being able to fall asleep. He was still awake on the fifth watch (55) and the paper window was already showing the light of dawn. The day was breaking. Outside, the rooster crowing made one think of female sobs.

Sloppy, Li Mubai realized he was leaving the same day and began to regret leaving. He stood up reluctantly. From the courtyard came



the sound of arms clashing. Li Mubai moved the chair to open the door and peeked out. Liu Qing and Tang Zhenfei, shirtless, were practicing saber. Li Mubai observed their technique. He found it laughable and told himself that, facing Xiulian, they would find themselves on the ground in two or three exchanges. Seeing that Li Mubai was up, Liu Qing and Tang Zhenfei began to show off their skill, wielding their sabers for a long time. Tang Zhenfei was the first to finish his sequences.

"Don't laugh at us, Lord Li!" he exclaimed.

"No, it was good! Why be so modest, Brother Tang?" Li Mubai replied.

A young boy brought him water for his morning toilet. After washing his face, he changed his outfit. Master Meng came out of his apartments, wearing a traditional jacket. Li Mubai went to meet him.

"Uncle Meng," he exclaimed, "I'm going to go. My aunt must still be sleeping at this time, I'm not coming home to say goodbye, could you do it for me later?"

"Lord Li, stay here for a few more days!"

"No no! I really have to go to Beijing; in two months I will come back to see you!"

Seeing that he would not be able to make him stay, the fencing master Meng had his mount ready. Meng Yongxiang, Liu Qing and Tang Zhenfei accompanied him to the entrance. Li Mubai strapped his precious sword and baggage to the saddle, then mounted his horse. The young man greeted Meng Yongxiang, clenching his fist in his other hand.

"Hope to see you again," he exclaimed.

"You will always be welcome," Meng Yongxiang replied.

"Don't worry, Uncle Meng, I'll be careful on the road."

Li Mubai's horse headed east.

Coming out of Xuanhua City, Li Mubai found himself on a wide path that stretched unimpeded among vast expanses of millet. The morning sun was shining brightly. The morning breeze made the flaps of his jacket float and the ribbon of his straw hat swirled. On the road, passers-by and mounts carried, on the yoke or on the back, in an incessant to-and-fro, bags and bundles; that was everyone's daily life. Li Mubai, facing this expanse, felt better, as if he had left behind the worries and torments of the past few days.

Throughout the journey, he would inquire about the path to follow. His horse was not going fast, he was in no hurry. In two days, however, he had already reached the border of Huai District. After a few li, a verdant chain of unbroken mountains rose up in front of him. On the ridges, like a snake, stretched out the Great Wall, sometimes visible, sometimes hidden. Li Mubai questioned the passers-by around, who informed him that it was Juyong's pass (56). Li Mubai recalled that one of his books mentioned "the succession of green mountains of Juyong Pass (57)" as one of the Eight Sites of Yanjing (58). This strategic passage was now in front of him, Beijing could not be very far. After having lunch in a small village market, Li Mubai climbed back into the saddle and whipped his horse, which quickened the pace for six or seven li. It was the middle of the day, the sun was scorching hot and people were covered in sweat. Li Mubai pulled on his horse's bridle and walked more slowly.

Crossing several hamlets in this way, he approached the mountains, but the passers-by were curiously rarer. "It seemed to me that the road through Juyong was very busy since it leads to Beijing," he said to himself. "How is it that there is no one passing by? Perhaps under this blazing sun people prefer to rest in the cool and not hit the road until a little later in the day; that is why there is no one on the way." Suddenly he heard a distant sound of bells spreading above the ripples of the wheat. Surprised, Li Mubai quickened his pace and came to a crossroads. He saw several carts heading north. The mules that pulled them all carried little bells. The vehicles displayed yellow banners with red borders, on which were fixed other bells. These disorderly ringings turned into a real din as he approached the convoy. Li Mubai stopped to watch it go by. He could read on the banners of the vehicles: "Yanqing Quanxing

Escort Agency (59)" and on another large white flag: "Yang Jiantang, the Divine Lance".

On the first cart sat two men. One on the stretcher, robust, about forty years old; another inside, thin with a thin mustache. They both wore a black ensemble of light silk and a straw hat, and waved a fan. In the other vehicles further back were several seated people, dressed in ramie jackets, waving round fans. They seemed to be rich and important merchants.

"It must be a reputable escort agency," Li Mubai thought to himself. It remains to be seen which of them is this Yang Jiantang nicknamed the Divine Lance. He whipped his horse and walked away. The convoy was now behind him and following him; so he also passed through Juyong's pass. Li Mubai had passed him for a little while, but he still heard the din of bells. Suddenly a man called out to him:

"And you who are in front, where are you going?"

Li Mubai turned around and saw the sturdy man in his forties waving to him. Li Mubai waited for the cart to come to his level, and his horse began to advance to the rhythm of the mules.

"I am going to Beijing," Li Mubai replied. "Which of you is Master Yang?"

"Our boss is not with us," the man replied. "It's a road we take often and he lets us drive the convoy on our own. As long as we have these banners, not the slightest mishap will happen to us, even at night. Otherwise, we wouldn't have such a great reputation!" he said, a proud smile on his lips.

"Do you come from far away?" the other man in the cart asked. "You are very daring to cross the Juyong pass on your own to get to the capital."

"How daring would it be to travel on this wide road, how many people have to take it every day?"

"Indeed many people borrow it every day; only, all have recourse to

an escort agency to protect them or gather in forty or fifty to dare to cross the mountains and pass by the pass. No one travels alone like you. Fortunately you fell on us; follow us, it will be better. Otherwise, you will certainly have your things and your mount stolen, without being sure that your life is spared!"

"Honestly," said the man sitting on top of the cart, "traveling alone is really dangerous! You should follow us, we will pass you off as one of our brothers in arms."

Li Mubai knew they had good intentions, but felt annoyed by their proposal. He thought to himself, "What kind of man is Yang Jiantang? How could I, Li Mubai, use his name for my safety?" So he replied proudly:

"It won't be necessary! If I dare to travel alone on this path, it is because I am naturally not afraid of a few mountain brigands. They won't plunder me, or even arrest me. If they dare, I'll kill them to the last!"

He then tapped his precious sword hanging from the saddle and exclaimed with a slight smile:

"He's my bodyguard!"

The two men listened to him in amazement. The one sitting on the cart says:

"Friend, what is your honorable name; which escort agency have you been working for lately?"

"My name is Li Mubai," he replied, smiling. "I am not an escort guard, I only know how to use my sword."

This name, the two men had never heard in Jianghu. They looked down at him somewhat and said:

"Friend, we advise you not to use force and to find out about the leader of the mountain people of Juyong Pass first! Needless to say, even our honorable teacher, Yang the Third Lord, dares not offend him."

"Tell me, what is the name of this bandit leader?"

"Do not treat him like that, if anyone hears you, we would also be in trouble. His name is Wei Fengxiang, nicknamed "The One Who Surpasses Lü Bu (60)". He was one of the most famous escort guards in the capital. With his precious sword and decorated halberd, no one has ever defeated him. In Beijing, he offended Huang the fourth lord, known as "Lean Buddha Amida". The two men have faced each other three times, without being able to decide between them. Subsequently, Huang the Fourth Lord begged Qiu Guang-chao, blood marquess, nicknamed "the General with the Silver Spear", to join him and the two men together defeated Wei Fengxiang. In anger, Wei Fengxiang left Beijing and settled at Juyong Pass. He reigns supreme over the mountain. But since he was originally an escort guard, he never attacks the convoys of the agencies; on the other hand, if the men of Huang the Fourth Lord, who trades beyond the Great Wall, want to go through Juyong, they are sure to be looted!"

"What excessive behavior! Because a man loses a fight, he doesn't hesitate to become a bandit," exclaimed Li Mubai. "Tell me a little about what Huang the fourth lord looks like? And this Marquis Qiu, why did he help him?"

"It is surely the first time that you go to Beijing," resumed the man sitting above the cart. "Otherwise, how could you not know these two great heroes of the capital? I'll tell you, Huang the Fourth Lord is called Huang Jibei. His family is very powerful and trades with neighboring countries, especially with Mongolia; business is prosperous and he has opened many shops in Zhangjiakou (61) and Guihua (62). Huang Jibei is very good at martial arts, he usually uses two hook sabers; apart from Wei Fengxiang, he has never known an opponent to match him. He is a very devout Buddhist who regularly makes large donations to monasteries for temple repairs and pavilion construction, the purchase of porridge or hooded clothing for the monks. That's why people nicknamed him "Lean Buddha Amida". Qiu Guangchao is the son of the Marquis of Anding, Qiu Lide. His residence is located in the western part of the capital. Although he is the son of a very influential family, he learned martial arts from his childhood. With his "Silver Lance", he

would surpass Zhao Zilong (63). Some even say that he would far surpass Huang the Fourth Lord, but they never clashed because they are great friends. When you are in Beijing, you will hear about all this; these two are among the most famous people in the capital!"

Li Mubai was delighted to have heard of these two men. He told himself that when he was in Beijing and had time, he would like to meet them and see what kind of people they were. He addressed the two guards:

"We've been talking for a while now and I don't know what your name is."

"It's too much honor," replied the man sitting above the cart. "My name is Sun Qi, I am nicknamed 'Iron Head'. This is my sworn brother Liu Wu, nicknamed 'The One Who Surpasses Wukong (64)'. We are both from Cang Prefecture and have long been escort guards on behalf of Lord Yang from Yanqing."

"Is Yang the third lord gifted in martial arts?"

Sun Qi was stunned:

"Even Yang the Third Lord, don't you know him? But where are you from?"

"I'm from the south of Zhili," replied Li Mubai, laughing.

"Even the men south of Zhili heard about it. It is the most famous of the escort guards in the Shuntian Prefecture of this region. It does not need to be repeated, but it is to him that Marquis Qiu owes his spear technique, as well as many other men who have studied with him."

Li Mubai nodded. "What do they all have to place such great importance on wielding the spear?" he wondered. "If there were some 'Divine Sword' or 'Silver Sword General' it would be easier to compete against them."

The men discussed thus as they walked. Sun Qi and Liu Wu emphatically reiterated their recommendations:

"Friend, we will soon arrive at Juyong Pass, be careful; If you do come across Wei Fengxiang and offend him, don't count on us for help if he gets on you."

"Be quiet," Li Mubai said with a small smile. "Whatever happens, I won't compromise you."

They continued to walk while talking and began to climb the mountain. From where they were they could now see very clearly the battlements of the Great Wall. Li Mubai was impressed by the rugged nature of the terrain and the grandeur of the building. He thought about the incredible difficulties that men must have encountered in erecting it.

Suddenly the carts in the back stopped. Sun Qi also stopped the vehicle and Li Mubai turned his horse's bridle to go see what was happening. From behind came five men, shirts open and soaked in sweat, all armed with sabers. Two of them wore straw hats, the others headbands. Li Mubai immediately understood that they were the bandits commanded by Wei Fengxiang and saw Sun Qi and Liu Wu get out of the cart and come to meet them. They greeted them tightly in the other hand and said to them, with a smile on their lips:

"Are you Wei the Second Lord's men?"

"Well done," answered one of them. "And you, which escort agency are you from?"

"From that of Yang the third lord, the "Divine Lance" of Yanqing. My name is Sun Qi, known as "Iron Head"."

The five men also greeted him respectfully.

"So you are from Yang the Third Lord's agency," said one of the brigands. "Can you give me your card?"

Sun Qi went into the vehicle to get a card in the name of the agency and handed it to the thief.

"Please deliver it to Wei the Second Lord," he said, "and greet him on behalf of our master Yang."

"It will be done!" He said as he picked up the card.

He glanced at Li Mubai and, believing that he too was one of Yang Jiantang's escort guards, greeted him without asking for further details and walked away. The other bandits greeted him as well and followed him.

As Sun Qi and Liu Wu got back into the cart and the bandits left, Li Mubai jumped from his horse and drew his sword. He exclaimed:

"Stop!"

The five thieves jumped up and turned around.

"You haven't asked for my card yet," he said with a smirk, "why are you leaving?"

The five men were astonished. The one who had already spoken asked him:

"Aren't you one of Yang the Third Lord's guards?"

"I have never heard of any Yang whatsoever! My name is Li, Lord Li!"

Seeing that Li Mubai was going to get them into trouble, Sun Qi and Liu Wu cried out in fright:

"We don't know him, we just met him on the way, he's not a man from our agency!"

"It's true! I, Li Mubai, am a man of dignity and will never intentionally use your master Yang's name to pass the pass and avoid trouble. It's clear? Come a little closer, you who like to fight, and feel my sword!"

The bandits railed violently and said:

"If you're not one of them, we won't be forgiving you. Come on, drop your sword first and give us your things and your mount."

They drew their sabers and surrounded Li Mubai.



Li Mubai, an amused smile on his lips, raised his precious sword and rushed at the one who had spoken. The man immediately parried the blow with his saber and said to him:

"Hey! Would you still dare to raise your weapon against me?"

At these words, the five individuals rushed together at Li Mubai. His precious sword appears in the east and strikes in the west. In no time, Li Mubai had already slashed two men. The other three were absolutely no match for him. After a few exchanges, they just couldn't seem to ward off the blows and turned around to rush off. Li Mubai chased them down. He cut one of the bandits again and yelled at the last two who fled:

"Go find Wei Fengxiang and tell him I'm waiting for him at Juyong Pass. If he dares, urge him to come!"

Li Mubai returned to see the injured lying on the ground. One was seriously injured and had already passed out. The others moaned in pain as they begged Li Mubai to be sorry.

"I don't blame your lives. Only you are thieves and often do much worse things; today, I make you pay for them. Do you understand? My name is Li Mubai and I have no relation to Yang Jiantang, the Divine Lance. I am going to Juyong Pass and will be waiting for your boss there. If Wei Fengxiang wants revenge, let him hurry. I won't wait forever."

Li Mubai brought his mount and put away his sword. He climbed back into the saddle and set off.

Seeing that Li Mubai had injured men and caused a disaster, Sun Qi and Liu Wu got scared and fled with the convoy, amid the din of bells.

Li Mubai took his time to enter Juyong's strategic pass. He found a tea house where he could rest while awaiting the arrival of Wei Fengxiang. He thought, "This road is an important path for those coming from Beijing and heading past the Great Wall into Kouwai, how can anyone tolerate that a tyrannical bandit like Wei Fengxiang can take refuge here? I don't know why the guards or the

men here don't take care of it? After several bowls of tea, neither Wei Fengxiang nor a few other mountain bandits appeared. No doubt they know that they must not irritate the great Li Mubai and do not dare to come," he thought. "I'm not going to stupidly wait for them to arrive. So he paid for the tea bowls and set off again, following the path south-east."

As it went down, it got hotter and more passers-by. The sky was clouding ominously and people's expressions darkened. The thunder suddenly rumbled and the travelers began to run in all directions, shouting that it was going to rain. Li Mubai had no oiled canvas in his luggage and squeezed his horse. He had not yet gone through a dozen li when the sky grew darker and the thunder more resounding. There were already no passer-bys or wagons on the path and, quickly, large drops of rain fell on Li Mubai's straw hat. Soon we could no longer make out the surrounding hamlets. He had to face the downpour and speed up. The rains of the fifth lunar month were like this, they came suddenly and fell heavily. The downpours fell like arrows on Li Mubai's body and his mount; they were soaked. Water flowed from the brim of his hat like a waterfall. On all sides, the shoots of wheat were setting and the fog was thickening. The pounding rain and the incessant rustling of wheat mingled like a deafening din of gongs and drums. The small streams along the path had all overflowed. The mud was over two inches deep and the horse's hooves sank into it, making it difficult for him to walk.

Li Mubai whipped his horse while wiping his face with a handkerchief. "What bad luck! So heavy rain, what if I can't find a hostel? His mount had cost him over forty liang of silver. Old and not very robust, she had traveled a long way from Ji Prefecture to Xuanhua government and was exhausted. How could she get to Beijing through the mountains on this long, impassable road? Under this downpour, Li Mubai was afraid that she would slip. It wasn't a big deal that he fell, but if the horse hurt herself it would be more dramatic.

All he had to do was brave the rain by walking slowly. Completely soaked, he felt the cold invade him. After a long time, the rain subsided, but night was falling and it was with great relief that he

saw a village in front of him. He felt reassured. He stayed at an inn on the outskirts of the city. His priority was to shelter his horse and bring her fodder. In his room, Li Mubai undressed from head to toe to put on dry clothes and then settled on the kang. He begged an inn worker to bring him a teapot and took a few sips of the tea. He felt a little better. The employee turned on the lamp and asked him what he wanted to eat.

"Bring a plate of sautéed tofu and some mantou (65)," Li Mubai replied. "That'll do."

Then he asked:

"Where are we here? Is the capital still far away?"

"You are in Shahe Town. If your horse is moving fast enough, you will be able to reach Beijing in a day."

Li Mubai was reassured. "I have traveled so long and I am finally arriving in Beijing. I hope my uncle doesn't worry too much about being late; if he knew all the twists and turns of my trip!" Li Mubai couldn't help but think back to the young Xiulian and see her charming melancholy face again. He felt like she was crying next to him.

Li Mubai was absorbed in his thoughts for a moment. He didn't realize that the employee was bringing him his meal and it was only when the employee asked him if he needed anything else that he noticed his presence. Li Mubai shook his head no, he didn't need anything anymore. While eating, he reproached himself: "How can I still think of her? I do have feelings for Xiulian, but we are not meant for each other. Thinking about her all the time, losing my mind, risks destroying me. It is absolutely necessary that I cut with the edge of my blade these threads of love in which I am caught."

After he finished his meal and closed the door, he remained silent on the kang. Through the window he could still hear the whispering of the rain, as if laughing at his torment. He exhaled a long sigh, then blew out the lamp and lay down.

The next day, Li Mubai was awakened by a noise of arguing from

outside.

## Chapter 8

*After winning the victory,*

*And subjecting the formidable halberd to the decorated pole,*

*The young hero discovers the dead end,*

*And does not know with what hope his future is adorned.*

Li Mubai was pulled from his dreams. Day was already breaking through the paper window and the rain had stopped. In the courtyard, men were arguing. Furious, a man with a hoarse voice asked:

"I'm asking you if yesterday a man named Li stayed here, yes or no?"

One of the hostel employees answered him:

"Every day too many customers come and go, how can we clearly remember which one is called Zhang, which one is called Li?"

"Bastard," answered the man with the hoarse voice, "did I not just tell you? This man is in his twenties, is on horseback and has a precious sword."

"We don't have a client with a sword here!" Exclaimed the employee.

Several people joined in the altercation:

"If there's no Li here, check out the other hostels!"

"He's not there," replied the man, "if he's not here either, it doesn't matter. But you, the employee, don't answer me like that, I don't want to get angry early in the morning and stab you!"

"What do you mean, a stab?" replied the employee, laughing coldly. "You really are a bandit who cannot be argued with!"

Li Mubai immediately knew that it was Wei Fengxiang. "This brigand has a hell of a nerve to come here." The young man left his room, bulging his chest and exclaimed:

"What is going on? Someone looking for me?"

The hostel employees, the ten or so customers who were there, as well as the three individuals who were looking for Li Mubai, all surprised by this appearance, stared at him. Li Mubai carefully observed the three thieves. Their leader, of tall stature, tanned face and chest, wore a black crepe robe and a long plait; he must have been around twenty-seven. It must have been Wei Fengxiang, nicknamed "The One Who Surpasses Lü Bu", the bandit of the pass from Juyong. The two other individuals who accompanied him wore pants and shirts of blue fabrics, soaked and covered with mud. They had rolled up their braids and really looked like mountain prowlers. One carried a saber, the other a sword. The man in the long black robe eyed Li Mubai:

"Are you called Li?"

Li Mubai, not in the least impressed, nodded:

"It is that very! My name is Li Mubai and I was the one who injured three brigands at Juyong Pass!"

"Good, the man replied, tilting his head slightly, so it's you. Your story of the wounded does not interest me, but I understood that you were a very presumptuous person; if I come to look for you today, it is to see who you are!"

"Presumptuous!" Li Mubai laughed, "I don't think I am presumptuous. On the other hand, if you talk about a duel, then I want to keep you company. Only, I want to know your name first, because I don't fight with just anyone!"

The man panicked and seemed to think of a name to give him. Li Mubai exclaimed:

"Rest assured, I am not eating on the Emperor's account and I am not helping the local authorities catch thieves. So tell me, is your

name Wei?"

Wei Fengxiang gritted his teeth and replied:

"Yes it's me!"

"Well, smiled Li Mubai, quickly go get your famous decorated halberd, I'm going back to my room to get my sword. This yard is spacious, we can fight here."

Wei Fengxiang had two other men in his service who were waiting for him outside, tending to the horses and carrying his halberd. Wei Fengxiang demanded that his weapon be brought to him and then harangued the crowd, a fist clenched in his other hand:

"Dear friends, my name is Wei. Today I came to pick up Li Mubai, we have no enmity between us. Only this man is very cocky and boastful in Jianghu and I can't stand it. So I come to measure myself against him."

People listened to him, some who thought they were leaving decided to stay. Near the steps, they waited for the two men to confront each other. The innkeeper and some of his employees wanted to stop them:

"Do not fight in my hostel, there is room outside and you will fight at your ease!"

Wei Fengxiang pushed the innkeeper and said terrifyingly:

"Rest assured, this is not a fight to the death!"

Li Mubai put on short clothes and came back from his room with sword in hand. Wei Fengxiang tucked in the two sides of his robe and retrieved his halberd. Li Mubai stepped forward and asked:

"Wei, do you want to risk your life or fight to see who's better? If you want to fight to the death, you better go outside, you don't need to involve the innkeeper or other people."

"He is right! He is right!" an employee hastened to say, "Lord Li's words are full of wisdom. Go outside and face yourself!"

"No need, replied Wei Fengxiang, it's too muddy, it might get in the way of the fight. There is no deep hatred between us," he told Li Mubai, "let's just face each other. If I win, you will have to kneel in front of me and greet me in front of everyone; if you refuse, you will have to follow me so that i punish you."

"And if it's me who wins," replied Li Mubai, "you will kneel and greet me too, forehead to the ground in front of everyone?"

"Of course," Wei Fengxiang growled, flushed with anger.

In a flash, the latter brought his halberd down to Li Mubai's chest, but struck the precious sword, which allowed Li Mubai to leap free. After this disorderly attack, Wei Fengxiang stepped back. Li Mubai could easily parry his powerful halberd attacks, so he had to change his tactics. Ferociously, he slashed his halberd in the direction of Li Mubai's throat. Li Mubai waited until the last moment to pull away and his sword accompanied the shaft of the halberd to finally slice a piece of it. Wei Fengxiang stepped aside, whipping the air with his halberd. Li Mubai rushed at him. His sword spun around and struck. Wei Fengxiang dodged on all sides to avoid the sword, which always passed very close. He couldn't raise his halberd again.

Li Mubai had the upper hand and would win soon. The people who witnessed the fight began to cheer him. It was then that Wei Fengxiang made an effort to ward off Li Mubai's attacks and not flee from them, and he exclaimed:

"Wait a bit!"

Li Mubai stopped his movements.

"Do you admit you defeat?" he asked.

"What are you talking about? What defeat? We can't decide between us," he said panting. "This yard is too small and there are too many people around. I cannot properly wield my halberd for fear of hurting someone. I change it for a sword. Do you still dare to fight me, sword against sword?"

Li Mubai chuckled:



"You are nicknamed 'The One Who Surpasses Lü Bu' and your weapon is the halberd. You don't impress me at all. If you take a sword, I can only crush you more. Think carefully about the weapon you are going to use."

Furious Wei Fengxiang threw down his halberd and retrieved a sword from his men. He brandished it and rushed towards Li Mubai who came to greet him with his own. Two cold lights fluttered in the air. Both men fought with agility, swerving to the right and evading to the left, attacking or retreating rapidly; the swords clashed with a resounding noise, like the awesome song of the dragon or the roar of the tiger.

The two men exchanged more than thirty blows, without one of the two taking over. People around looked dumbfounded, some were afraid for Li Mubai, others were encouraging Wei Fengxiang. The two men, who were close against each other, grew more and more impetuous. Suddenly Li Mubai's sword struck in a flash and Wei Fengxiang was seen jumping aside. Blood spurted from his right arm and his men immediately came to support him. Li Mubai stopped and solemnly declared:

"And now you still haven't confessed yourself?"

Both ashamed and angry, Wei Fengxiang, face red with anger, grew uglier and uglier. He suddenly let out a loud cry and dropped his sword. He had just passed out. Fortunately, two of his men were supporting him and he did not fall to the ground.

Li Mubai smiles coldly:

"No need to play dead. You won't have to bow down to me. You would have to spend a few more years with a great master to be able to beat me!"

Earlier, because Wei Fengxiang had been particularly brutal, the innkeeper and the employees did not dare to add more. But now that he had been beaten by Li Mubai, their attitude changed and they started to curse the two men accompanying him:

"You haven't taken him from there yet, are you waiting for him to

die with us to take him or what?"

A customer next door says:

"His wound is not deep, he did not want to bow down and that is why he is pretending to be unconscious!"

"With this level, what could we expect from him!" An employee exclaimed.

The bandits had already taken Wei Fengxiang outside. One of them returned to the courtyard to retrieve his halberd and sword. He questioned Li Mubai in passing about his activities and wanted to know where he came from. Li Mubai had not yet responded as the employees and some customers approached the man to kick and insult him, forcing him to leave the premises.

Li Mubai greeted the hostel people and the crowd with folded hands, explaining that he would not disturb them any more, then returned to his room to put his sword back into its scabbard. He wanted to leave immediately, but was afraid Wei Fengxiang would come back and make a fuss. Besides, he would inevitably incur reprimands from the innkeeper if, after disrupting his house early in the morning, he left it immediately after the incident. It was better to have breakfast here, give it more than enough for the bill, and finally go back to Beijing. Everything would be settled that way.

As he was resting for a moment, someone called out to him with a heavy capital accent:

"Is Lord Li in his room?"

"Who is it?" He asked as he opened the door.

He found himself facing a short man in his thirties, wearing a long unlined civil servant's robe and light boots. Li Mubai recognized one of the inn customers who had witnessed his fight. Of all the spectators, he had been the most enthusiastic to cheer and encourage him.

Li Mubai begged him to come in and sit down. The man, very courteous, addressed Li Mubai in these terms:

"My name is De Xiaofeng, I am Manchurian and belong to the White Banner (66). I am currently on a mission for the inner courtyard (67) of the capital. I am fond of martial arts and I like to make friends with any experienced and talented person, escort guard or residence guard; this earned me the nickname of De the Fifth Lord, the "Iron Hand".

"Nice to meet you," Li Mubai told him, bowing several times, his fist in his other hand. "You surely practice qigong (68) or have an extraordinary strength in the wrists?"

"We can not say that... Let's say that I know a little about the subject. And you, brother Li, what is your nickname? In which Zhili district does your honorable family reside and what are you going to do in Beijing?"

Li Mubai told him his name, explained that he was from Nangong District of Ji Prefecture and was visiting a high-ranking uncle in the capital punishment ministry. De Xiaofeng, surprised, asked him:

"If you're from Nangong, how come you go through Juyong's pass?"

"I first went to an old friend's house who lives in Xuanhua's government," Li Mubai replied.

"Ah, that's why. I thought you were having disputes because of your rents and I came to offer my help. I plan to stay another day or two, then I will return to Beijing. I live in Dongsi pailou (69), at Santiao lane. North of the alley is a large door, this is my humble home. Brother Li, when you are in Beijing, come and visit me if you have time."

"I will not miss it!" Li Mubai promised.

De Xiaofeng then asked him about his fight with Wei Fengxiang.

Li Mubai found De Xiaofeng sincere and enthusiastic, he was not a self-interested or devious person; he therefore summarized his origins in broad outline. Then Li Mubai mentioned his encounter with the Juyong Pass bandits, and how he intentionally provoked this duel. De Xiaofeng seemed to esteem him more and more.

"Brother," he said to him. "You excel in both letters and martial arts, you are truly worthy of being a literate knight!"

"It's too much praise," smiled Li Mubai, "how could I ever be a learned knight? I have studied letters and the sword, without success; now I am counting on a relative to find me a menial job. How could I afford to play the hero in the capital? I have heard that there are currently several people in Beijing who excel in martial arts. Hopefully I might be able to meet them."

"In the capital, there are indeed a few to excel. One of the most famous is the Marquis Qiu Guangchao, nicknamed "the General with the Silver Lance". Everyone knows him. There is also Huang Jibei known as "the Lean Buddha Amida", coming from a powerful family of merchants. He is a knight, fair and generous, who is even more popular. The second young lord Tie, of the beile (70) Tie family, known to people as "Little Mustaches", is also extremely strong. I know these three people, I have crossed paths with them at weddings or funerals and we hit it off, but I am not intimate with any of them. They are part of rich and honorable families, it is always difficult to forge links with people of such high rank."

"These rich lords can practice martial arts with famous masters and spend a lot of time training," said Li Mubai. "Of course, they are good. Only if they had to travel the Jianghu, that would be another story!"

"Once, the young Marquis Qiu went on a campaign with his father's troops and he distinguished himself there by his skills. But he does not have the ambition to become an official, otherwise he would have at least the rank of garrison commander. Huang the Fourth Lord, Lean Buddha Amida, regularly travels beyond the Great Wall. All the bandits in far-off lands have heard of his reputation, and they know that he does not enjoy unjustified fame."

Li Mubai admired these two men more and more. "When I'm in Beijing," he said to himself, "I absolutely have to meet them." Li Mubai and De Xiaofeng talked for a while longer, then the latter took his leave and went back to his room. Li Mubai had lunch and then paid the innkeeper. After gathering his things and getting his mount ready, he went to De Xiaofeng's room to bid him farewell.

The latter accompanied him to the entrance.

"We will meet again in Beijing!" He exclaimed.

The two men greeted each other with folded hands and Li Mubai climbed into the saddle. He left Shahe and headed for the capital.

The rain had stopped, but the road, full of mud, was difficult to pass. The heat adding to this, Li Mubai could not reach Beijing in the same day. When he arrived at Qinghe Township, it was already dark. He found an inn and stayed there for the night. The next day at dawn, he resumed his journey south. Around eight or nine o'clock he saw the ramparts of the capital. What a majestic ensemble; the crowd was dense there; really, this famous city deserved to be the capital of the old dynasties! Li Mubai had heard that people in Beijing were particularly sly and that there were several places in the capital where riding was prohibited. This is why, when he arrived in front of the Desheng gate (71), he set foot on the ground. He put on a dark crepe robe and straightened his headdress, then, holding his mount by the bridle, he passed the gate and entered the city. "The name of the alley where my uncle Qi Dianchen resides is 'Half South', so I should head south; only this city is so big that if I trust myself and search blindly, I will never find. He inquired thus from a passer-by, who answered him very kindly:

"You are in Desheng Gate Street, the alley you are looking for is beyond Shunzhi Gate (72) which is a long way from here. Even with my explanations, I don't think you will find it, nor I for that matter. You just have to go directly south of the city. Look for an alley called the House of Jiang Lane; from there, go straight and exit west of the lane. You will then be in the Xinjiekou district. If you look south you will see the Shunzhi Gate. I say you will see it, because to get there you will still have to walk a good ten li."

The man gesticulated as he explained it to him and Li Mubai listened to him for a while. He didn't quite get it, but thanked him politely and walked over to Desheng Bridge, where he inquired from another person, and finally found the alleyway of Jiang's House.

He took the exit to the west and found himself on a crowded avenue. On both sides the shops were numerous and prosperous. Li Mubai noticed some men on horseback and climbed back into the saddle, tracing straight ahead in a southerly direction. After passing Xisi's pailou, he saw a tall and majestic watchtower in the distance. He thought it was probably the Shunzhi gate and walked over to it. After passing it, he asked for his way again. The alley he was looking for was not far away. All the adventures he had known before arriving here had tired him, and he found it wiser not to go to his uncle immediately. He inquired of passers-by to find an inn nearby.

"Here," one of the people explained to him, "it's the alley of the Donkey Market. If you go straight east, you will come across the Xiheyuan district; there are several dozen hostels there."

Li Mubai found the neighborhood, there were indeed many hostels there. Only they all belonged to wealthy and influential families and were much larger than the yamen of his small district. On their signs in golden characters, one could read: "Residence for senior officials". Not only am I not a civil servant, Li Mubai said to himself, but these houses are way too expensive for me. If my uncle found out, he'd probably think I'm a spendthrift. A little further on, Li Mubai found a more modest establishment, the Yuanfeng Inn. He left his horse with an employee and then reserved a small room. He washed his face and put on pants and a long dark crepe robe. He put on light shoes, put on a little black cloth hat and provided himself with a folding fan.

It was no small task, but he finally found him. Li Mubai inquired about the abode of official Qi and found himself in front of a large doorway topped with several lintels. On the frame was a beautiful sign, with golden characters on a red lacquered background, which read: "Virtue and Benevolence, home of the Qi family". Li Mubai recognized the name of his uncle's house. The door leaf was half open, Li Mubai tapped and stepped forward. Soon someone answered him from within and a young man in his twenties appeared. He was wearing a long, pale blue jacket and a black waistcoat. The young man asked him who he was looking for and Li Mubai understood that he was certainly dealing with a servant of

his uncle.

"My name is Li, I'm from Nangong," he told him. "Lord Qi is my uncle."

"Lord Li," respectfully greeted the servant, "my master and my mistress did not stop hoping for your coming these last days. Please come in!"

The young servant opened the way for him.

"Lord Li of Nangong has arrived!" He announced.

They went through the door between the outer courtyard and the inner courtyard and arrived in the reception hall. The furniture in the room only featured a few chairs and a lacquered elm wood table, as well as calligraphy hanging on the walls; the whole did not give an impression of luxury. Li Mubai, reassured, said to himself that the office which his uncle was in charge of was certainly upright. The servant invited Li Mubai to sit down long enough to tell his master. He returned shortly after.

"Your uncle and his wife invite you to join them."

Li Mubai straightened up and readjusted his clothes, then followed the young man into a much more lavish room, located north of the courtyard. His uncle Qi was sitting on an ebony seat. Li Mubai stepped forward and greeted him very respectfully. He then passed on to him the tributes of his family. His uncle's wife, whose name was Yangshi (73), appeared in the room.

"Dear nephew," she exclaimed, "how come you're only coming now? When did you leave home?"

Li Mubai blushed slightly.

"I left home last month," he replied. "But I fell ill on the way for several days. I didn't get to town until this morning."

"It is true that you have a pale face," agreed his uncle. "Sit down!"

Li Mubai waited until his aunt was seated before settling on a

bench. His uncle looked upset. He said to him while waving a goose-feather fan:

"When I returned home four years ago, I saw you once; you are now taller, but thinner; you probably don't have to go on a trip often. Last year your aunt sent me a letter asking me to find you a job. Only, you know, I'm just a small civil servant in the capital. I work in the Ministry of Punishment, but I am not someone who runs after money. Even though I am a reputable leader, I am not rolling in the gold and I have no contact with the officials of the current government. In addition, you are not a student and you did not pass the imperial exam of your province. It's really not going to be easy to find you a job."

Li Mubai nodded at his uncle's words, but was very disappointed. His uncle continued:

"Recently, at the secretariat of the ministry, a man died. It was a good opportunity and you could have replaced him. Fortunately, I knew someone influential who works with the government, to get you a letter quickly. When you received it, you should have come straight away. You are only arriving now, the place is already taken. It's really bad luck, you missed a great chance!"

Li Mubai listened to him but seemed to have no regrets. He just told himself that the future was getting more difficult for him. Now that he was in Beijing, he couldn't consider returning home empty-handed. It was also not possible for him to stay here too long without work. He began to frown. His uncle then questioned him:

"Didn't you bring any luggage?"

"I have a horse and some things, I left them at the inn."

His uncle asked him where he stayed, and Li Mubai told him about Yuanfeng Hostel in Xiheyuan District. Leader Qi thought for a moment, then said:

"For now, stay at the hostel, we do not have a spacious and comfortable room. And then, with your two young cousins who live here, it may be embarrassing. When you have time, write me



several sheets in regular style, so that I can take a look at your writing and tell you what I think. I'll try to find you something. When you run out of money, tell me."

Li Mubai nodded with small smiles; he exchanged a few more words with his uncle and aunt. He began to yawn. With this heat, Li Mubai assumed he wanted to take a nap. He didn't want to bother them any longer and took his leave. The leader Qi did not insist on restraining him.

"Come back tomorrow," he told him. "The best would be in the afternoon, around three or four o'clock, I'll be home."

Li Mubai continued to answer with smiles, and the young servant accompanied him to the entrance.

"See you tomorrow, Lord Li," he told him.

Li Mubai nodded and walked north. He sighed and dragged his pace, thinking, "How come I'm so unlucky!" Of course, if I had been offered a post of small secretary in the Ministry of Punishments, I would have refused it. But now I find myself doing nothing in the capital! My uncle says I can count on him if I need money, but I think it wouldn't be right to ask him for it."

Li Mubai walked to the Caishikou district, he found a stationery store where he bought two white notebooks of high quality Xuancheng paper and a small brush suitable for regular writing. All these objects seemed to him much heavier than a sword. This is all going to kill me, he thought. If only I were like my father, to lead a wandering life with sword in hand, then I would be happy. But no, I will find myself at best copying official documents for a yamen. In a few years, I am afraid that my youthful ideals will be totally destroyed."

Back at the inn, he threw paper and paintbrush on the table and wrote no characters. After lunch he fell asleep on the bed until dusk. He had dinner and went for a stroll on the great Qianmen Avenue. The shops were bustling with life and the street was crowded, so he felt at ease. After a while, he returned to the inn and found himself alone in front of the lamp, completely devastated.

Seeing brushes and paper on the table, he thought he would do well to write down what his uncle had asked him to do. Otherwise, he would never dare to present himself before him. Exhaling long sighs, Li Mubai took out his ink (74) and began to rub it on his ink stone. As he soaked his writing brush, guests in an adjoining room started heckling. In the midst of bursts of laughter, someone was singing an er huang-style opera aria at the top of their lungs (75), which definitely put him off. The heat in the room was stifling, and Li Mubai was sweating profusely.

He put down his brush and decided to put off his activity until the next day. He blew out the lamp and lay down on the bed, waving his fan. Li Mubai thought about the young Xiulian and wondered how she was. From the next room, the man began to sing: "The owner of the shop is taking his horse with the spotted ocher robe to the east, Qin Shubao cannot help but cry."

His dismal, downcast voice stirred Li Mubai and saddened him even more. "I'm going to stay a few more days in Beijing," he said to himself. "If I can't find anything to do, I will sell my mount, and with my only sword, I will wander the world of Rivers and Lakes!"

He tormented himself until late at night, then fell asleep lightly.

The next day he had to apply himself in spite of himself to the regular writing of characters and was quite satisfied with the result. He thought back to his ten years of study and darkened.

In the afternoon he went to his uncle's house. He finally had a meeting after his work, and Li Mubai only saw his wife. His aunt told him about the capital's high prices and complained that officials, even in high places, were not earning enough. She explained to him that they had to maintain a multitude of relationships, which was very expensive. On several occasions, her husband had applied for a post outside the capital, to no avail. His aunt then mentioned the question of marriage.

"Your uncle and aunt don't care," she exclaimed. "How come you're not yet married at your age? I don't think you want to stay single all your life?"

Li Mubai blushed and explained to her that those close to him cared about it but that it was a personal choice. He had not passed the provincial exam and his affairs were not going as he hoped, which is why he preferred not to get married just yet.

"That's good, you have ambition," his aunt agreed. "Take the time to think it over. If your uncle finds you a job, let me take care of your marriage. I even already have a little idea about the young girl."

Li Mubai was unhappy to talk about his marriage and found it difficult to change the subject.

After a long time, his uncle still hadn't returned and the day was beginning to fade. He left the pages he had written and took leave of his aunt. She wanted to keep him for dinner but Li Mubai politely declined her offer and returned to the inn. This marriage story really saddened him. During the meal, he drank several glasses of alcohol to forget his grief. The liquid warmed his whole body. It was impossible for him to stay in the stifling room any longer. He put on a light tunic and left. Li Mubai walked haphazardly through the alleys. The more he went, the more animated they seemed to him. His footsteps led him into a hutong where a multitude of glowing lanterns hung around small doors facing each other. In front of each entrance were harnessed several magnificent horses. Most of the people walking back and forth in the alley were sumptuously dressed and laughing heartily. Above all, they seemed to be young sons of dignitaries or wealthy merchants, who came through the doors in small groups. Li Mubai found these people rather annoying who showed their joy in this way. He observed the door signs hanging above the lights; he read names like "The Lucky Doctorant", "The Hostel of Pretty Springtime" or "The House of a Hundred Beauties". Li Mubai suddenly realized, "I am on a street of brothels. Am I not just a poor and miserable young man? My footsteps have led me to a place of lust, isn't it funny? As he turned around, two customers walked out of one of the establishments. They were about to get into the car,

"Ha ha! Mubai, old brother! I have met you here!"

Li Mubai jumped.

## Chapter 9

*The young man is deceived,*

*And finds himself running girls;*

*Faced with the insolent, Iron Hand shakes his fist,*

*And disturbs the Opera hall.*

Li Mubai turned around and recognized his friend De Xiaofeng, Iron Hand, he had met in Shahe Township. He went to meet him while blushing. De Xiaofeng wore an unlined, sapphire blue official dress, and a short, high-necked gown. He had put on a braid and held a folding fan in his hand. All smiles, he addressed Li Mubai:

"So, old brother, I'll meet you here today. I knew you were a learned knight; but I did not know that you were also a libertine knight."

Li Mubai was really confused. He had arrived by chance in the pleasure district and did not know how to justify himself. He just smiled awkwardly and replied:

"When did you get home, big brother?"

"The day you left, I managed to sort out all my business; I didn't linger there any longer. After you left, I really regretted not asking you where you were staying in the capital. I was afraid I would never see you again. Fortunately, I find you here!"

De Xiaofeng introduced Li Mubai to the man accompanying him. About thirty years old, he was rather stout.

"This is Yang Junru, from the prominent Yang family in the capital," said De Xiaofeng. "You can call him Fat, worry free!"

Li Mubai clenched his fist in his other hand and greeted him.

"I met Li Mubai in Shahe," De Xiaofeng continued, pointing to him.

This is the person I just told you about. He is a knight who excels in martial arts. Watch out if you offend him!"

Yang Junru smiles. De Xiaofeng grabbed Li Mubai by the arm and asked him:

"Old brother, tell me, your dear friend is from which house? We have to go and say hello.

"I don't have any," said Li Mubai, more and more embarrassed. "After dinner, I went for a walk and my footsteps brought me here. I didn't particularly intend to come here."

"I can't believe you," exclaimed De Xiaofeng. "You just wander around and stumble upon Alley of the Rock, it can't be a coincidence!"

"Yet it is true," said Li Mubai, "I did not even know that this alley was called that!"

"Hey! Li Mubai, my brother, don't be embarrassed with me! Well, if you have nothing else to do now," continued De Xiaofeng, "accompany me north of town to an equally pleasant place!"

Li Mubai was naive and readily agreed, thinking of going to a good friend's house. The three men set off north, walking side by side while chatting. Their two carts followed them. Shortly after, they arrived in front of a door whose sign read "House of Scented Clouds, renowned for its recitals and ballads." Li Mubai thought he could not see well and stopped dead. The vehicles pulled up and De Xiaofeng entered the brothel with ease and naturalness. Yang Junru let Li Mubai pass, who felt his heart beating extremely fast and his legs were made of cotton. It was the same feeling as when he first entered the Imperial Examination site. He saw no choice but to follow the two men.

Inside, in a well-kept courtyard, adorned with oleander, tuberose and gardenias in pots, dazzling decorated lanterns shone on all sides. Young boys and servants came and went. From each room escaped the conversations and laughter of men and women. Adorned in her finery, a prostitute came out of one of the rooms to

escort a client to the entrance, addressing him with affectionate words. As soon as De Xiaofeng and Yang Junru walked through the door, one of the boys exclaimed:

"The fifth lord and Yang the second lord have just entered!"

He then stepped forward to open the way for them. The curtain of the west bedroom opened and a following called out to them:

"Please, Lord De and Lord Yang, come and settle here!"

De Xiaofeng let his companions pass and came last. In the room was a beautiful woman who came to meet him. She said to him, smiling and smirking:

"Hey! Lord De, how come you haven't come to see me in the last few days? What good wind brings you today?"

The next one laughed in turn:

"It's true, it's been over a week since Lord De came to visit us. The girls haven't stopped thinking about you every day!"

"You don't know!" Yang Junru replied. "Lord De has just obtained a post in Guangdong. He is very busy with his new duties. Where would he still find time to come and see you?"

The two women were pleasantly surprised and offered their congratulations to De Xiaofeng.

"Don't listen to him," the latter replied. "Fat's words are not worth a fart! I had some business to take care of at Shahe and didn't get home until yesterday."

Yang Junru sat down and, supporting his paunch with both hands, he burst out laughing. Li Mubai, being in an unfamiliar place, was looking everywhere. The room was sumptuously appointed. On the walls were hung several parallel sentences (76), all dedicated to the attention of the person of Meixi (77). Li Mubai assumed that was the first name of De Xiaofeng's friend. He observed the young woman more attentively and found her rather unpleasant, and despite her name, he would not have wanted to woo her. She had

small eyes and a flattened nose in her twenty-five years. She had painted her face, which brought out her blood-red lips. She wore a bun in which she had stitched all kinds of ornaments set with pearls and jade. She was dressed in a top with ample sleeves of bright red color, made up of bands of embroidered silk ribbon; all matched with green pants and pink embroidered shoes. Her little feet were wrapped very tightly.

Meixi held an enamel water pipe and asked Li Mubai, smiling:

"What is your name?"

"My name is Li."

"Lord Li," she said, offering him the opium pipe.

"I do not smoke."

"Lord Li is an honest person," said De Xiaofeng. "You don't have to mess with him!"

"How dare we," replied Meixi. "But Lord Li will still be able to visit us and take care of us a bit!"

De Xiaofeng took the pipe and took a puff. He joked for a moment with Yang Junru and Meixi. Soon after, a prostitute called Xiaoxian, whom Yang Junru knew, entered. Li Mubai found a certain charm in her. She chatted with them for a while, then offered to go with Lord Yang to his room. De Xiaofeng was drinking his tea, Meixi was fanning him. He addressed Li Mubai:

"Where do you live in town?"

"I am staying at the Yuanfen hostel in Xiheyuan district," Li Mubai replied.

"Good," he nodded. "One day I will come to see you."

"And you, big brother, where is your home?"

"I live in Dongsipailou (78), at Santiao alley. In some time, I will invite you to eat at my place, in the good franquette!"

"You don't have to, big brother. If I come, it will be mainly to see you."

"Don't be embarrassed with me," continued De Xiaofeng. "We are now like old friends, otherwise I would not suggest you come with me here. I hope we will see each other often, then you will understand what kind of person I am: someone straightforward and devoted to their friends, but I do not hide from you that I do not shy away from them and often offend them. I am not doing this on purpose and in the future I should not give too much importance to my remarks."

"I am also a frank person. In my native region, I have spent my time studying conscientiously but I do not have a great knowledge of life. I had no friends when I arrived in Beijing. Now that I have met you, you will be able to serve as a guide."

"What could I show you in life? Except maybe how to lead a life of debauchery! But don't think I'm that libertine as that. In fact, I only come here occasionally... "

At that moment, Yang Junru and Xiaoxian reappeared in the room, interrupting the two men's discussion. Meixi had listened to them talking seriously without participating in the discussion and staining their nails with balsam. Seeing Yang Junru and Xiaoxian arrive, she made everyone chat happily. Yang Junru thought Li Mubai was an elegant and unusual young man, no doubt because he came from another province, and he tried to win his favor by arranging to find him a pretty prostitute. Li Mubai was about to decline his proposal when De Xiaofeng said:

"If you want to find him a girl, you have to take great care in your choice. Li Mubai is a distinguished person, not everyone is worthy of it. In my opinion, all the prostitutes in the south of the city are fallen angels, mermaids or demons."

Yang Junru turned his big head in the direction of Meixi and Xiaoxian:

"You hear? Lord De says you are all hideous monsters or demons!"



The two women simulated anger and joked, showing off:

"Lord De, we do not eat men! How could we be monsters? How do you respond to that?"

"You don't eat them but you misplace them nicely. Monsters or not, big Yang and I see you as demons of love."

Yang Junru was laughing out loud. The two women hid their smiles with their handkerchiefs. De Xiaofeng patted Li Mubai on the shoulder and said to Yang Junru:

"It's true, if we want to find a lady for our dear brother Mubai, I can only see one who can please him."

Yang Junru and the women began to think. Meixi, piqued by a slight jealousy, exclaimed:

"Could it be Yantao?"

"No," replied De Xiaofeng, "it is not someone from your household."

"I've got it," said Yang Junru. "Are you talking about Petite Prune, from the House of Springtime Perfume?"

"How could Petite Prune measure up?" replied De Xiaofeng coldly. "Even I don't look at her!"

Yang Junru called out several first names, but De Xiaofeng kept shaking his head. Li Mubai confused them and aroused their curiosity now; they wanted to know what was the name of this girl who could be worthy of him. De Xiaofeng, as if he wanted to keep the exclusivity, said with a smile:

"I won't tell you now, neither will I tell Li Mubai. He has just arrived in Beijing and needs to get some rest. In a few days, when he's free, I'll take him to see her."

De Xiaofeng just pulled the pipe. Yang Junru knew that De Xiaofeng's outlook on girls was not the same as most people. He put Xishi (79) on an equal footing with any other woman, beauty was not what mattered to him. Annoyed, he continued to search while

chatting. De Xiaofeng noticed that Li Mubai was getting impatient and looked at his watch:

"It's only eight o'clock!" he exclaimed. "Are you in a hurry? Stay a while and we'll leave together."

"No, I will go," replied Li Mubai. "I still have things to do."

De Xiaofeng understood that Li Mubai did not often set foot in brothels. He spoke very little, did not smile and seemed to be bored.

"My cart will take you home," De Xiaofeng said.

"It is not necessary," replied Li Mubai. "The hostel is not far, I can walk home."

De Xiaofeng stopped him and called his driver to beg him to bring him back. All then accompanied the young man to the entrance.

"See you tomorrow!" They said in concert.

Li Mubai wanted to escape from this demon den as soon as possible. He took his place in the cart; the conductor waved his whip and headed north. They crossed the many alleys of the pleasure district where he met all kinds of vehicles. "This is the place where young aristocrats come to have a good time," Li Mubai said to himself. "It would be better if I didn't come back here." He thought back to De Xiaofeng, who would inevitably want to bring him again; he would find it hard to refuse. He remained thoughtful for a long moment, unable to stop a flood of incongruous thoughts.

Soon after, he arrived at the inn. Li Mubai wanted to give the driver some money, but the driver refused because he knew he was a recent friend of his master. In his room, Li Mubai lit the lamp. It quickly attracted mosquitoes and he put it out then lay down on the bed. He thought back to the events of the evening and told himself that De Xiaofeng was truly a generous friend. If he was nicknamed Iron Hand, how could he not practice martial arts? Yang Junru, he was a paunchy and uneducated merchant, who was by no means a merchant. He thought again of Meixi and Xiaoxian, who to his eyes really looked like the hideous monsters De Xiaofeng had mentioned;

he finally told himself that they were in fact just poor devils. His thoughts pestered him and he did not fall asleep until very late. The next day he woke up tired. He had nothing in particular to do, and he found it inappropriate to return to his uncle's house. He stayed in his room in the dark; he was terribly bored.

After lunch, the heat was stifling. Li Mubai, tired, lay down on the bed to take a nap. In the courtyard, he suddenly heard someone call him. He recognized De Xiaofeng's voice and straightened up. One of the men from the inn then entered and informed him that Lord De was outside looking for him. Li Mubai put on his shoes while asking him to let him in. De Xiaofeng was already entering without the slightest embarrassment and made himself comfortable, while waving his fan. He looked around the room and saw that Li Mubai had very little business.

"I'm disrupting your nap."

"I was not sleeping," replied Li Mubai. "I had nothing to do and it makes me lazy."

He served tea to De Xiaofeng who said to him:

"Don't mind me, little brother. Today, I mainly come to see you. Have you seen your relative? How is your business going?"

Li Mubai sighed lightly and explained to him the turn of the story with his uncle.

"Don't worry," his friend replied. "You too will have an opportunity. When you have nothing to do, you will come find me or I will come. We can then play chess, listen to the opera or stroll through the alleys. Either way, you probably won't spend your entire day worrying about nothing. It's very bad for your steel physique!"

Li Mubai was very grateful for his words but told him:

"I don't worry at all."

"Of course you don't have to worry! If you can't find anything to do at the moment, remember that "the wise man knows how to wait for the right moment". What great man has never encountered

difficulties? As for the money, don't worry, I can help you. So, is it still catastrophic?"

"Your words are right," replied Li Mubai. "But I'm not down, you know!"

"Come on, you can't hide anything from me, little brother. Do you think I can't see it?"

He urged Li Mubai to change as he was taking him to listen to the opera. Li Mubai put on a long robe, De Xiaofeng put on his overcoat and they left Yuanfeng Inn.

De Xiaofeng's cart was waiting for them outside. The driver's name was Fuzi and he respectfully greeted Li Mubai. The two men got into the vehicle and De Xiaofeng begged Fuzi to lead them to the Yangxi Performance Hall. The whip sounded and the cart drove away from Xiheyuan, passed the Meat market, and finally came to the door of the building. De Xiaofeng entered the Opera House first. Several men, all dressed in short gray outfits, were squatting. They really looked like the thugs of the capital. As soon as they saw De Xiaofeng, they stood up and greeted him respectfully. They all smiled at him and addressed him: "Hello to you, Lord De!" De Xiaofeng just bowed with a smile on his face and led Li Mubai inside.

The sound of gongs, drums and two-string violins coming from the opera house rang out and the two men entered. The Famen Temple was being played on the stage. A few forerunners who indicated the places came forward and all greeted De Xiaofeng. Some said:

"Lord De, you haven't come in the last few days!"

De Xiaofeng just smiled and then addressed one of them:

"Go see my driver and bring me my water pipe."

The man nodded, another asked Li Mubai for his name.

"This is my brother, Lord Li," replied De Xiaofeng.

The man greeted him respectfully and said:

"I'll find you two seats in front of the stage."

De Xiaofeng and Li Mubai followed him to the front of the stage. About ten very elegant people were watching the show. As soon as they saw De Xiaofeng, they stood up and bowed, smiling in his direction. De Xiaofeng looked embarrassed and nodded back at them. Li Mubai thought to himself that the Iron Hand really enjoyed great fame. The employee found them a table facing the stage, one of the best locations. De Xiaofeng looked very satisfied and Li Mubai got comfortable and got rid of his overcoat. They brought them a teapot and water pipe. De Xiaofeng chatted with Li Mubai while tugging on the pipe and fanning himself. The play had just ended and an excerpt from the work *The Clear Water Beach* began. It was the scene of the fight between two famous heroes, the eleventh lord and the Black Tiger; it was really very successful. The drums sounded, Li Mubai was ecstatic.

Two men dressed in a set of silk came to chat for a while with De Xiaofeng. They had brought their pipes and a servant was waving a fan for them. The scene of the duel over, the men withdrew. The performance continued with an excerpt from the play *The Yuzhoufeng Sword* which did not excite Li Mubai much. De Xiaofeng was still smoking. He asked Li Mubai:

"Don't you have such good shows at home?"

"We don't have a room in Nangong," replied the young man. "After the fall harvest, we thank the gods by putting on opera performances for a few days, and every year I don't really look forward to going."

"You must be terribly bored," said De Xiaofeng, laughing.

"Oh yes," agreed Li Mubai. "Especially since I don't have a friend like you there. Apart from reading and practicing the sword, I have nothing else to do."

"How many children do you have?"

At this question, Li Mubai was puzzled for a moment. He first thought to tell him that he was just not married yet, but he figured

that De Xiaofeng, who used to meddle in things that did not concern him, would undoubtedly want to play the matchmaker. For him and that would only increase his worries. He finally answered him ambiguously:

"I don't have a child yet."

De Xiaofeng didn't ask him any more and they continued to watch the show. Suddenly a noise of arguing erupted from the back of the hall and all the spectators turned around. Men were fighting; someone was trying to interfere:

"Calm down! Do not fight! The fifth lord is right in front with a friend!"

Then we heard a loud voice with a provincial accent growl:

"I don't care about your fifth Lord De! Even if the provincial governor came here, he would have nothing to say to me and would have to be reasonable!"

At these insulting words, the spectators took fright and fixed their gaze on De Xiaofeng. His face hinted at a slight irritation. He put down his pipe and walked forward.

The crowd exclaimed:

"The Lord De is coming!"

De Xiaofeng counted a total of five to six men involved in the altercation and recognized one of them. It was an employee of the satin warehouse, called En Bao. This man had a predilection for private fights and brawls, which had earned him the nickname "Enzi the Iron Leg". The other men wore white, they were sturdy and looked fierce. They were soaking Enzi the Iron Leg, and they really seemed to be taking it out on him.

Enzi the Iron Leg was known all over the southeastern part of town, how could he tolerate having the underside? He had most certainly provoked these individuals, and now seeing De Xiaofeng arrive, he took the lead and exclaimed:

"You will prove me right, Lord De! I was not careful with my pipe and accidentally burned one of the men sitting in front of me. I told him straight away that I hadn't done it on purpose, but it wasn't enough for him."

One of the tall men was flushed with anger; you could see the veins in his neck appear. He says :

"Everyone clearly heard it! If he hadn't insulted me, I wouldn't have assaulted him!"

De Xiaofeng knew for a fact that Enzi the Iron Leg liked to carry around people arriving in the capital. He had certainly intentionally burned the man and had not apologized. De Xiaofeng exclaimed:

"Okay, calm down! Come on, it's over! For such a small story, you are not going to disturb the spectators and disrupt the performance! Listen to me and shut up!"

De Xiaofeng's interventions generally ended the quarrels; Enzi the Iron Leg said nothing more, but the man, not knowing who he was and seeing everyone bow to him, got angry and raised his voice:

"I don't know you, why should I listen to you? Who do you think you are?"

These words made matters worse. The case was going badly. De Xiaofeng said furiously:

"Bastards, we do you a favor, how can you be so brazen and still dare to open your mouth to insult me!"

The man grabbed a teapot and threw it at De Xiaofeng, who dodged it; he went to hit someone else's head. The commotion was growing in the room. De Xiaofeng then grabbed the man and said:

"Let's go outside! It is okay to disturb people like this!"

The man answered:

"If we have to get out, let's get out!"

He left the room, followed by the other four fellows. Li Mubai, Enzi the Iron Leg, and a whole crowd who were no longer interested in the show also crowded outside. Crouching in front of the entrance, the local bullies, shirtless, revealing a thick belt, then approached De Xiaofeng waddling and said:

"Lord De, don't get angry! Let us take care of it!"

"Stand back," De Xiaofeng replied. "This is none of your business!"

Then, addressing the man:

"There are five of you. I am warning you: it only takes one gesture for about fifty men to land here immediately. So do you want a group fight or an individual fight? Choose!"

Faced with De Xiaofeng's martial aplomb, the five individuals became slightly nervous, as if they realized that they had just provoked someone powerful. No one intervened to reason with them, and the tall man naturally could not back down. He took off his jacket which he gave to one of his companions and hit his chest, exclaiming:

"This fight is all about you and me, and no one else!"

"Good!" De Xiaofeng replied, rolling up his sleeves.

Li Mubai then approached:

"Big brother, let me fight against him!"

"Don't worry, and look at me instead!"

De Xiaofeng feigned a punch with his left hand; the man threw himself on him, grabbing him by the wrist, and he struck him with his other hand. De Xiaofeng stepped back, dodging the punch, and sneered. The man, pulling on his left wrist, pulled him towards him forcefully, wanting to hit him in the face with his other hand. Unexpectedly, De Xiaofeng took advantage of the situation, approached him and quickly grabbed his own trapped wrist to deliver a powerful blow to the man in his chest with both hands. A dull noise is heard. The man frowned in pain and, dizzy, fell to the



ground. His companions rushed to support him. The man was livid but managed to sit up a bit and spat blood. People around cheered De Xiaofeng:

"It's certain! The Fifth Lord truly deserves his nickname Iron Hand!"

De Xiaofeng, smiling, exclaimed:

"It's nothing! He was only a tactless scoundrel, hence my duty to break him (80)!"

On the man's sturdy chest appeared the mark of the blow struck by De Xiaofeng, a frightening red. His mouth and his white pants were stained with blood. Two of his companions still supported him. He seemed to have no more strength. He managed to raise his head and address his opponent:

"Friend, I admire you. What is your name?"

De Xiaofeng did not have time to answer. The men, shirtless, who were squatting at the entrance on their arrival, hastened to manhandle him:

"You don't even know the name of The Fifth Lord, the Iron Hand, and you dare to come to Beijing to be insolent! Quickly go home to find your wife! And in your interest, stay there!"

Not daring to provoke them any longer, the injured man and his companions left the scene.

De Xiaofeng then addressed the gathered crowd, a fist in his other hand:

"Let's not delay the show!"

All returned to the room, commenting on the incident; each gave his opinion, saying that the man had been looking for him. Lord De had made sure not to make him lose face, but failing to seize this favor, he had aroused his anger. With that single punch, Lord De had shown himself to be truly indulgent as he could very well have made him breathe his last! Enzi the Iron Leg bowed to De Xiaofeng and said:

"Lord De, with this story, you're going to be mad at me for a moment!"

"I'm not sorry," he replied with a smile. "But from now on, stop fussing with your pipe!"

Everyone burst out laughing. De Xiaofeng dragged Li Mubai by the arm and said:

"So, old brother, did you like my show? Let's go back inside now, see the end of the one we came for!"

In an indescribable hubbub, all returned to their places. Then everything seemed to be in order and calm reigned in the room again. On the stage, playing the role of a virtuous woman, a person was singing.

Back in their seat, Li Mubai questioned his friend:

"Big brother, your mastery of the fist is very impressive; it's really beautiful qigong!"

"In someone else's eyes, I want to admit it," smiles De Xiaofeng. "But coming from you, it's like you're kidding!"

"I'm not intentionally flattering you."

"You praise my mastery of the fist and my qigong, but they are not worth my glance! When you fought with Wei Fengxiang, The One Who Surpasses Lü Bu, in Shahe, I immediately saw that you had received the teaching of a great master. You are an expert in the practice of the sword, your kung fu is very evolved, for sure, you are very strong. I even think I can say that you have walked the Jianghu for many years."

Li Mubai was dumbfounded. Didn't his friend risk mistaking him for a Jianghu bandit? He said with a smile:

"You make me laugh, big brother! I have only been to Baoding twice in my life and hardly more to the neighboring district of Julu. The last time I took the road, I passed by Xuanhua first to see a friend, and came directly to Beijing. Where do you see that I travel

the world of Rivers and Lakes?"

"Little brother, you can't hide anything from me. The other day in Shahe, during the fight, I observed the incredible agility of your movements, it was like in the show earlier, you can jump and move as you want. As for your mastery of the sword, it is certain that this does not come from your personal training; you had to fight at the risk of your life with many individuals to get there."

Li Mubai listened to him and inwardly admired his friend's insight. But lest someone else overhear their conversation, he preferred to change the subject.

After the play The Yuzhoufeng Sword, they performed The Story of Xishi and The Yuchang Sword. Then came the final track, taken from hit pieces; today it was a passage of La Taverne Yuelai and the Temple of Sakyamuni. Facing the character of the Thirteenth Lady, Li Mubai could not help but think back to the beautiful and talented Yu Xiulian, so far from him now, and felt a deep sadness. De Xiaofeng addressed him:

"A young knight like you should live with a woman like the Thirteenth Maiden. But maybe your partner is good at martial arts?"

It was as if a dagger was stabbed into Li Mubai's heart, who let out a small sigh. De Xiaofeng continued:

"Don't worry," De Xiaofeng said to comfort him. "Today I fought and it makes me happy. At the end of the show, I invite you to Zhengyanglou (81) for a bite to eat. Then I'll take you somewhere to meet a courtesan famous for her chivalrous spirit. She is not versed in the wielding of the saber or the sword, nor in the practice of boxing, but her temperament is worth as much as that of a valiant knight and her dazzling beauty has turned heads over and over. I only see you who can befriend her, you will really be a match."

Now was not really the time to talk to Li Mubai about this, but the word "knight" intrigued him especially as it was presumably a beauty. De Xiaofeng continued chatting for a while, until Li Mubai said to him:

"I will gladly accompany you to eat, but I will never set foot in that kind of place again."

"But you absolutely have to meet her! She is the most beautiful woman of all the brothels in Beijing, and she is truly a remarkable person. I'll tell you two things about her. Once, a girl in the same establishment as her, who was spending way too much money, found herself crushed by debt. At the end of the year, due to pressure from her creditors, she could barely feed herself. She could not find a way out and her health suffered more and more; she ends up hanging herself in her room. Fortunately, someone found her in time and saved her. Only, she still wanted to die and, again taking everyone by surprise, she again tried to kill herself. The courtesan of whom I speak to you, in her grandeur and her generosity, paid all her debts out of her pocket, over two hundred liang of silver, and helped her find a safe husband among her clients, keeping her safe for the rest of her life."

Li Mubai found this strange and continued to listen to De Xiaofeng:

"Another time, the woman I'm talking about took care of very young prostitutes that a family in the neighborhood kept up. Their boss was a terrible person and mistreated the three young girls even more than if they had been dogs or pigs. Indignant, she mobilized other prostitutes and went to protest to the imperial censor, who condemned the man. The young girls were subsequently employed as servants by charitable souls."

As if he doubted these words, Li Mubai asked:

"But this prostitute, how can she have so much money and use it for a story that is none of her business?"

"She's not like the others. Most prostitutes work for brothels and have to pay them all the money they earn. Despite their appearances, these prostitutes dressed in silk and covered in jewels do not have a single part aside, because even their bodies do not belong to them. This woman is free and lives with her mother. All the money earned goes to both of them, apart from the rent they pay at the brothel in which they reside. And that's not all, she has a high position as a courtesan and no matter how much you want to

spend, if she doesn't like you, you won't be able to approach her. I have heard that so far no client has been able to stay overnight with her."

"Can officials pay as they see fit for visits to prostitutes?" Li Mubai asked. "Aren't they afraid the imperial censors will notice?"

"I think they all have schemes," smiles De Xiaofeng. "The censors must know it, but they turn a blind eye."

The forerunners were looking for a place for a person who, seeing De Xiaofeng, greeted him cordially. De Xiaofeng motioned to the employees, handed them some coins and asked them:

"Who are the men from earlier, with whom I fought?"

"They don't come often," replied one of the employees. "I heard that they were escort guards from the Chunyuan Agency. They must not have been in Beijing for a long time, otherwise how could they have irritated Lord De?"

De Xiaofeng seemed very surprised that these men belong to this escort agency. Without waiting for the show to end, he said to Li Mubai:

"It's getting late, let's go eat!"

They retrieved their overcoats and left the room. Outside, they found their vehicle already advanced; one of De Xiaofeng's servants, nicknamed Shou'er, was also there. Seeing them ready to go, Shou'er said to them:

"Lord, are you coming home?"

"Did something happen at home?" De Xiaofeng asked him.

"No, no, nothing happened, it's just that my daughter, who is married, came to visit me."

"Ah! Your daughter has arrived, of course she has to stay a few days. I have a date now, but you just have to go home."

Shou'er thanked several times and watched them leave in the direction of the south of the city.

They quickly arrived at Zhengyanglou. At the restaurant, the boss and all the waiters greeted De Xiaofeng very cordially.

"Lord De," exclaimed the manager, "it has been several days since we last saw you!"

De Xiaofeng smiled at him. A waiter led the two men into a spacious room, and De Xiaofeng ordered food and alcohol.

After their meal, they went to visit this famous courtesan, so famous throughout Beijing.

## Chapter 10

*Among the decorated lanterns, the courtesan,*

*Like a knight, lies in wait for the elegant young man;*

*It's hard to let go of your feelings*

*In alcohol, he drowns his sorrow.*

This courtesan with the chivalrous soul of whom De Xiaofeng spoke had settled in the alley of the pleasures of Hanjiatan (82), at the House of Sumptuous Treasures. She was known as Cuixian (83). Because she loved to paint bamboo and orchids and always signed by the character Xian, her close friends called her Xianniang, the favorite Xian. Xianniang had been roaming the brothels in the capital for two years. Her beauty and talents had won her over many other courtesans, and she quickly rose to fame. Her character, however, was slightly atypical; offending more than one client she had found rude, she did not compete with other prostitutes, supposedly famous, who seduced their clients with the usual procedures.

That evening, when the lamps were being turned on, De Xiaofeng had forced Li Mubai to come to this place. Li Mubai was happy, he officially felt a client because he was going to admire this courtesan, and put on great airs. They followed a young boy; Li Mubai in the lead, they went upstairs to the building. They found themselves in a tastefully arranged boudoir. A lady in her fifties walked up to them, smiling.

"Take a seat, gentlemen," she said. "Xianniang is next door and is changing. In a little while she will be here."

The two men sat down on red rosewood chairs. The lights of the lamps flickered on the red satin curtain and Xianniang still did not appear. The lady brought them tea, and something to smoke for De Xiaofeng, then asked them their names.

"My name is De and he Li," De Xiaofeng replied. "It is Lord Li who

would like to see Xianniang today."

While De Xiaofeng was speaking, Li Mubai observed the room with many mirrors and calligraphy. Among the paintings, a painstaking representation titled The Three Wandering Knights caught his attention, as well as a pair of parallel sentences which read:

Green, the thousand bamboos remind me of you,  
valiant knight;

I spend the night reading the four scrolls of Delicate Clouds (84).

It was autographed by the characters "The Hermit of the Yan Mountains", written in a vigorous style reminiscent of the book The Annals of the Black Girl of the Wei dynasty. Li Mubai thought to himself that this courtesan really had nothing to do with other prostitutes. De Xiaofeng then whispered to him:

"You can see that she is of high rank!"

Li Mubai started to get impatient:

"She's long overdue!"

De Xiaofeng waved his fan and looked at him kindly. They waited a good while, then the red curtain finally opened and a subtle scent spread throughout the room. Xianniang, who had been slow to arrive, entered. The eyes of the two men began to shine. Xianniang was hardly more than twenty years old. Slender, an oval face, she had thin eyebrows and small eyes. With her cherry lips and peach cheeks, she was lovely, like a herbaceous peony. She was wearing a red silk jacket and Azurite silk trousers with a light green belt. Dazzlingly beautiful, she looked both simple and elegant. Entering the small living room, she gazed at Li Mubai's stature with her charming little eyes, then asked him:

"What's your name, lord?"

Not knowing why, Li Mubai blushed and replied:

"My name is Li."



"So here is Lord Li," she repeated softly with a beautiful smile.

She still looked over the young man's body with her exquisite gaze. De Xiaofeng watched the scene, a slight smile on his lips. Xianniang also asked him his name and he replied:

"My name is De. Today I am accompanying Lord Li who, by visiting you, comes to admire your beauty."

"Well," Xianniang smiled, "how could I be worthy of such attention?"

"Lord Li has just arrived in Beijing," De Xiaofeng continued. "He is alone, away from home and looking for a place where he can often come to have fun. I dare not take him anywhere else, I've always heard that your heart is good, that's why I thought of bringing him here, hoping you will take good care of him."

Xianniang smiles:

"How dare we manhandle someone here?"

"My daughter is an honest and well behaved person," said the lady.

"I know," continued De Xiaofeng, "that's why we came here."

Xianniang gave De Xiaofeng something to smoke and poured tea back to Li Mubai. Then, taking a seat beside them on a small stool, she chatted with the two men.

When Li Mubai met Yu Xiulian at Changchun Temple in Julu, he thought to himself that she was unparalleled in beauty. Unable to live near her, he found himself in despair. His heart darkened and his body lost its vigor. He never thought he would meet Xianniang, who exuded this special charm. In his eyes, she was more fragile and more attractive than Xiulian, and he kept raving about her. During the conversation, he found that the young woman's words were subtle; although these were only words of courtesy, she seemed sincere. At first, only Xianniang asked questions that Li Mubai answered. Then he abruptly asked her her name. Her name was Xie. He questioned her again about her age and her province of origin. She was nineteen years old and from Huaiyin District (85).

Li Mubai wanted her to talk about her life, but De Xiaofeng gave him a dissuasive look and they talked about other things. Suddenly a young boy was heard calling from the court:

"Miss Cuixian!"

"Mom," she said, "go see what's going on!"

Her mother went out and returned soon after, holding a red paper ticket which she handed to Xianniang, saying:

"Lord Xu is asking for you!"

After reading the word, De Xiaofeng stood up and said:

"We have to go."

"I'm not going out," Xianniang said. "Why don't you stay a little longer?"

"We still have something to do this evening," replied De Xiaofeng. "We will be back tomorrow!"

The two men left the room; Xianniang accompanied them to the threshold of the door and asked them:

"Lords, are you sure you will come back tomorrow?"

"In fact," replied De Xiaofeng, "I will not come, only he will come!"

They walked along the corridor and went back down to the courtyard. They looked up upstairs and saw Xianniang staring at them, leaning against the railing, smiling especially at Li Mubai.

Outside, they found Fuzi, to whom De Xiaofeng said:

"Let's bring back Lord Li!"

Fuzi headed for Xiheyuan. Li Mubai got out of the cart after they got to the hostel.

"I'm not coming home," De Xiaofeng told him. "We will meet again tomorrow!"

The vehicle left with a crash in an easterly direction.

In his room, Li Mubai lit the lamp and an employee of the hostel brought him some tea. He sat down and indulged in his thoughts; the silhouette of a lovely and tender young girl had engraved itself in his mind. He said to himself: "A while ago, when I wanted to question Xianniang about her life, why did De Xiaofeng stop me?" This is undoubtedly because the girls who find themselves in prostitution have a painful past, and if a client asks them like that, it only rekindles bad memories. How could she know that I am not one of those customers who seek pleasure? I too have had a life full of adversities. Our meeting is exactly as Bai Letian wrote (86): "When we meet in this wandering life, no matter our past, we can bond". He let out long sighs. Looking at the wall, he saw only his one hanging sword and suddenly felt extremely sad. He stood up, stamped his foot, and called an employee to buy him some alcohol. He drank until he was hot and his head dizzy. It was only then that he switched off and went to bed.

The next day after lunch he went to his uncle's house. He was taking a nap and Li Mubai had to wait until he woke up, around three o'clock, to see him and talk to him again about the characters he had written.

"You write well. Only at first glance, we can see that you are using the Weibei style of calligraphy; it was the famous poets who used it. This style is not used for writing administrative documents or for obtaining titles and honors. No wonder you took the exam twice without success, no doubt because your characters absolutely do not correspond to conventional writing. All exam papers or official yamen documents are written in Zhao! Have you ever copied writing models of this style? If this is not the case, you can go to Liulichang (87) to buy part of the precious treatise on Longxing Temple written by Zhao Zi'ang; Put aside cursive writing and practice especially rewriting customary characters. In a few months, I think you will be able to master this style. Now, in everything you do, you have to write well. You can always keep your writing style to offer calligraphy, but if you want to find work or make a fortune, it will be more complicated!"

These words hurt Li Mubai. He did not linger and quickly took

leave of his uncle. Both sorry and angry, he said to himself, "Little talents don't make great men.' I am a boy full of dignity, I find it hard to imagine myself becoming a scribe in order to be able to live."

Very angry, he did not go to Liulichang and returned to the hostel under a blazing sun. When he came through the door, someone approached him, greeting him very respectfully:

"Lord Li, my master asked me to deliver this letter to you."

Li Mubai recognized Shou'er, De Xiaofeng's servant, and, surprised, retrieved the letter. He wondered why his friend was writing to him.

"You can go home," Li Mubai told him. "Tell him that you gave me his note and that I will come see him in a moment."

Shou'er greeted him again and walked inside.

In his room, Li Mubai opened the letter; the characters were written as big as a walnut. Here is what they said:

"Mubai, my dear brother, when I got home yesterday I suffered from too much heat and I'm afraid I won't be able to go out with you tonight. My little brother is only a few years younger than me and already has a rare talent. Despite the bad experiences in life, you need to take care of your health and enjoy it at your leisure. Don't be sad, don't let yourself get sad, and don't spoil your impressive stature. I know that your efforts to find a job were unsuccessful and that you are running out of money, which is why I am sending you a hundred liang. Accept this modest present. Hope we can see each other soon and have an open heart talk. Respectfully, your brother Xiaofeng."

Li Mubai was confused and full of gratitude. He thought, "I met De Xiaofeng by chance and he treats me with such great care! I risk offending him if I do not accept these hundred liang of silver." He put the letter aside and thought that if he was sick he should go see him. However, he was unable to remember which alley in Dongsipailou district he lived in. "Let's wait until tomorrow, if he doesn't

come to see me, he is not well and there will still be time to visit him."

After dinner, Li Mubai went to a bank to get the hundred liang from the bill of exchange. On the way back, passing by the jewelry market, he saw a brand new cart tumble towards him. A woman inside called out to him:

"Lord Li!"

Surprised, he stopped and saw Lady Xie and young Xianniang who, with a beautiful smile, addressed him, leaning slightly out of the car:

"Lord Li is walking?"

Li Mubai immediately blushed and answered by pointing to the west:

"It's because I live in Xiheyang."

"Tonight," said Xianniang, "will you invite Lord De and come to my house?"

"Lord De has had a heat stroke and will not be coming out today."

"You'll come by yourself then, won't you?"

"Yes," agreed Li Mubai, "of course, I will come."

"Then right away!" Xianniang said.

She gave him a seductive look and smiled gracefully at him then moved back inside the car, which raced through the market.

Li Mubai panicked and regretted his words. He was not to go see her tonight; he was upset the whole way back to the inn. Suddenly he said to himself: "In his letter, De Xiaofeng tells me to enjoy life, and here I must apply his advice, instead of tormenting myself; drowning my worries in alcohol is no use. It is better that I am entertained, by finding in the pleasure district a poor creature with whom to be able to chat and thus alleviate my loneliness a little. He

waited for dusk to change before he went to the House of Sumptuous Treasures.

A group of customers had just left the establishment. Xianniang felt lonely and seemed to be hoping for someone to come. She couldn't explain why this young lord remained so present in her thoughts. "I passed him today on Qianmen Avenue," she thought. "He said he would come tonight without fail. He doesn't seem to be very wealthy and I'm afraid he won't be able to come see me often."

Lost in thought, Xianniang saw again the thin face of Li Mubai, this handsome young man dressed simply, with sparkling eyes. He seemed fragile and attracted her. Then she thought about the life she had spent so far and the years to come, and couldn't hold back her tears. Afraid to be seen by her mother, she turned her back to the lamp and wiped her eyes. Resuming her place in front of the dazzling light, she let see a remnant of a tear clinging to her eyelashes like fine shiny pearls. From the ground floor there were many bursts of laughter coming from the bedrooms of the other girls in the house.

She remained seated for a while and, as no clients were arriving, she went to rest for a moment in her room. Shortly after, one of the young servants exclaimed from the court:

"A visit for Cuixian!"

Her mother quickly opened the curtain and heard someone walk down the hall.

"It's Lord Li!" She smiles.

Xianniang immediately regained her senses and combed her hair. Standing up, she saw Li Mubai wearing a sapphire blue silk robe, waving a fan.

"Lord Li," said Xianniang, "you have come!"

"I usually keep my promises!" He said smiling.

After he got comfortable, Lady Xie served him tea. The most considerate Xianniang told Li Mubai:

"If you'd rather drink something fresh, I made a sour plum drink myself."

"Gladly!" He answered while continuing to wave his fan.

Quickly, Xianniang straightened up and walked into the next room.

Dame Xie addressed the young man with a smile:

"Lord Li has a predestined affinity with Xianniang. When other people show up here, she's never as enthusiastic as she is now."

Li Mubai laughed softly. The red silk curtain opened. Xianniang carried a small silver plate on which was placed a bowl, imitating the style of the five colors of Kangxi (88), which she handed with both hands to Li Mubai. He sat up slightly and took a sip of the refreshing drink, which he found both sweet and fragrant.

"So," Xianniang asked, "how do you find it?"

"Delicious!" Li Mubai replied several times, while looking intently at the young woman.

Xianniang was combed differently and looked even more flirtatious than the day before. Her cheeks were also less painted in red. She wore an ensemble of pale pink silk with purple outlines, a little loose; she really looked even prettier.

Xianniang took a seat facing Li Mubai and blushed a little.

"Lord Li," she asked him, "then you live in Xiheyuan?"

"Yes," he nodded, "at Yuanfeng Inn."

"Your wife didn't come with you?"

As he said this, Xianniang carefully observed the young man's expressions with his beautiful shining eyes. Li Mubai chuckled and replied:

"I'm not married yet."

Lady Xie left the room at this point.

Xianniang was silent for a moment, then resumed the conversation by asking:

"Lord Li is now working on what yamen?"

"I have been here for a short time, I have not yet found a job."

"I've heard," she continued, frowning, "that it's not easy to become a civil servant now. Many lords find themselves substitutes for the prefecture or in different divisions, without finding a vacant seat."

"It's because," he said smiling, "I don't think I will become a civil servant. I came to Beijing to find a subordinate position. But I quickly realized that it is not that simple and especially that I did not want to do that. I find myself here doing nothing. Fortunately, I met De Xiaofeng and we became very good friends. We see each other often, so I'm rarely alone."

Xianniang found Li Mubai to be really straightforward. He was not at all like the people who usually frequented brothels, and who always flaunt their merits widely. "Lord Li is stricken with bad luck," she thought. "Unfortunately, I will not be able to ask him to come and see me often." She tells him :

"Lord Li is still young, you are not satisfied with yourself yet, but later you will surely be able to distinguish yourself from others. I am only a courtesan but I know how to distinguish sincere men from treacherous people. Yesterday, from the first glance, I immediately felt a great respect for you!"

Xianniang lowered her head; Li Mubai was beset by a thousand feelings.

"You praise me too much," he told her. "De Xiaofeng told me that you were an extraordinary person and told me about you as a sincere and honest "woman knight"; So I wanted to visit you, because otherwise, I never come in this kind of place."

"Coming to this kind of house remains an occasional distraction. I will, however, entrust you with this; I only say it to you and I



couldn't say it to anyone else. I am a courtesan but I also have a heart, and the idea is really unbearable to me that a man of noble ambitions comes to spend time here."

As she spoke, she wiped the corners of her eyes with a tissue.

Li Mubai did not expect to hear such a speech. As he was about to answer, Xianniang continued:

"Only I would love to take the time to chat with you."

She gave him a furtive look that sounded pained and frowned. She stood up smiling and exclaimed:

"Let's not talk about that anymore and instead chat about more cheerful things."

She glanced at the screened window. She was suddenly overjoyed and, taking Li Mubai by the arm, urged him to look through:

"Tonight," she told him, "the moonlight is magnificent!"

Li Mubai, assailed by a thousand feelings, gazed at the pure and limpid moonlight, then gazed at the charming Xianniang, who held his arm with her delicate white hands. He felt overwhelmed with sadness and nodded with a slight smile. Lady Xie reappeared in the room.

"Tomorrow is the 15th," she said. "In two months it will be the Mid-Autumn Festival (89)!"

Li Mubai remained chatting with Xianniang for a while longer. Then other customers arrived and he took his leave.

Back at the inn, in his room, he lay on his back and gazed at the moonlight through the window. He was in all his troubles and could not find sleep. Dawn was breaking slowly, the sparrows began to chirp in the yard, and he fell asleep at last, until lunchtime. After the meal, having nothing to do, he remained confined to his room. He hadn't heard from his friend and was worried. He tried to remember which alley in Dongsì pailou district he lived in. Whatever, he would find him; De Xiaofeng was a well-known

person in Beijing, it would be easy for him to inquire and find his home. He changed, got his fan and went to see his friend. At the Qianmen Bridge, he hired a mule-drawn cart that drove him east of the city.

It was very hot, Li Mubai kept waving his fan, and the driver's head was covered in sweat. They quickly arrived at Dongsipailou. The driver asked him:

"Is it at the Santiao hutong, at the western or eastern entrance to the alley?"

"I do not know!" Li Mubai exclaimed. "This is the first time that I go to my friend's house."

"What's his name?"

"His name is De, he's a Banner man, he's Manchurian."

The driver turned around and looked at Li Mubai strangely.

"Looking for Iron Hand, the Fifth Lord?" he asked him.

"That's it!"

"Lord De lives in the middle of the hutong, his door is located north of the alley. He really is a great man! In the east of the city, the only man he can compete with is Lean Buddha Amida, Huang the Fourth Lord."

The cheerful conductor whipped the mule and they went a little faster.

They arrived shortly after at the western entrance to the alley. Li Mubai got out in front of De Xiaofeng's house and paid the driver. The door of the house was in red lacquer, decorated on either side with two crouching stone lions. To the east was the vehicle entrance, where two elegantly dressed servants were shopping for tuberoses. Li Mubai walked up to them and asked them:

"Is the fifth lord at home?"

The servants looked at Li Mubai and said:

"What is your name?"

"My name is Li, I live in Xiheyuan."

"You are Lord Li of Yuanfeng Inn," said one of the servants hastily. "Come in! Enter, please!"

The day before, the servant had heard Shou'er speak of a new acquaintance of their master. This friend's name was Li, was not from the area, and lived at the Yuanfeng Inn. Driver Fuzi had already spoken about it; these last days the master saw him often; if they weren't going to listen to the opera, they would go strolling in the brothels. They were both really on excellent terms. The servants gave him a warm welcome and led him into an interior courtyard. Li Mubai went through a beautiful decorated door and then walked along an exterior corridor. In the courtyard, he met the servant Shou'er who was watering the flowers. As soon as he saw Li Mubai, Shou'er put down his watering can and came to greet him respectfully.

"Lord Li is here!" He exclaimed.

Li Mubai greeted him with a slight tilt of his head and Shou'er led him into the reception hall. This room was huge, furnished with tables and chairs of red sandalwood or pear wood. Large-format paintings depicting hunting scenes as well as many calligraphies by famous painters hung on the walls. On a long, narrow table were old copper crockery. Li Mubai took a seat and a servant brought him some tea. Shou'er left to warn De Xiaofeng.

After a while, De Xiaofeng dressed in a silk ensemble entered the room.

"Old brother," he said, "you managed to find where I live!"

"Big brother," exclaimed Li Mubai, "are you better?"

"Yes Yes! I must have had sunstroke the other day and had diarrhea; yesterday I was already better."

De Xiaofeng took his place facing Li Mubai. A servant poured more tea, and Shou'er brought in a water pipe. Li Mubai then exclaimed:

"Big brother, how can you still..."

De Xiaofeng waved his hand in disapproval and didn't let him finish his sentence:

"Brother, don't say anything, what's the point!... Later, if you need anything, tell me, I won't refuse you anything. As long as you remember the way, you will be welcome here and I hope you will come often. Every day I finish work at ten o'clock and have nothing more to do for the day. Do not be shy at my place, the servants are also at your service and will treat you with respect."

"Okay," Li Mubai replied. "I will come often."

De Xiaofeng took a few puffs of opium and then asked his friend with a smile:

"So, did you go back to see Cuixian?"

Li Mubai blushed.

"Yesterday afternoon," he said, "I met her with her mother on Qianmen Avenue. She was in a carriage and stopped to ask me to come and see her in the evening; without thinking, I immediately accepted. Then I said to myself that with her it was better to keep promises and so I went to see her, hardly more than a quarter of an hour."

De Xiaofeng smiled. He couldn't help saying:

"Brother, how can you be so delicate and think about such complicated things? I'll tell you, you have to take pleasure in going to these places and not worry more than that. We only have superficial relations with the girls and we distract ourselves at random from the meetings. If we say we're going, we're going; if we say we don't go, and we don't go there all our life, what does it matter?"

Li Mubai nodded, smiling slightly. He felt confused because he

lacked the steadfastness of De Xiaofeng. He continued:

"I really think you and Cuixian are predestined. She is known for her impetuosity and many men have paid large sums of money to spend time by her side, without her saying a single friendly word to them. During your first interview, she did everything to not make you lose face, and just yesterday when she passed you, she stopped to talk to you. If it had been anyone else, he would have been ecstatic and hastened to bring her a silver ingot.

"But I don't really want to go to that kind of place."

"It is better, indeed, to avoid going there too often. Seeing you all the time inevitably brings about feelings. A great hero should not be tied down and move on. I heard that Cuixian was a good person, that she was not the type to get hold of clients and grab all their possessions; besides, she does not have at all the faults of people attached to a luxurious life. She must have met many very wealthy people, but you, she found you exceptional at first glance!"

"Come on, big brother," resumed Li Mubai, "how about something else?"

"Good," replied De Xiaofeng. "Have you eaten?"

"I ate at the inn and then I came here, and you?"

"I ate too. Apparently, today you have nothing planned, neither do I. How about some fun in Erzha, the Second Lock?"

"Where is it?"

"Even Erzha, you don't know where it is," De Xiaofeng laughed. "If you tell someone in the capital, I'm afraid they'll laugh at you. We are going to go there; you have to go to the Jihua gate (90), then take a boat to Erzha. When we want to return, we will take a boat to the outskirts of the city. We will come back here and you will stay to eat."

"It's okay," agreed Li Mubai. "Go change, big brother, then we'll leave."

De Xiaofeng, delighted, begged the driver Fuzi to get out the cab and instructed Shou'er to ask in the kitchen to prepare several dishes for dinner, then he walked to his apartments.

De Xiaofeng lived with his mother and had a wife and two children.

"Li Mubai is here," he said to his wife.

"Why didn't you let him in?"

"He is very respectful of conveniences, I left him in the reception room. We go for a walk in Erzha."

De Xiaofeng changed and took his fan, then joined Li Mubai.

"Let's go!" He exclaimed.

The two men got out and got into the car. Shou'er brought a water pipe and De Xiaofeng once again recommended:

"At four o'clock, don't forget to hurry the kitchens to get everything ready!"

Shou'er nodded several times and Fuzi made the horses move forward. The vehicle headed for the Jihua Gate.

At the city gate, the two men got out of the car. De Xiaofeng addressed Fuzi:

"You can go home, you will come back to pick us up here at four o'clock."

They walked to the ditch of the ramparts and took their places on one of the docked boats. On the boat were already a dozen people, at most, who were undoubtedly going to Erzha for a walk. The boat began to move slowly over the green algae in a southerly direction. On both banks stood dense groves of beautiful green weeping willows, whose thousands of fine branches dragged in the water or were tossed about by the gentle dust-laden wind. The high wall of the ramparts seemed to go on endlessly. It was past midday and the sun was scorching hot, but on the boat the heat was bearable.

De Xiaofeng and Li Mubai had settled under the awning of the boat. A man who beat time with small wooden percussions which he struck against each other began to hum popular tunes; the first was Big Sister Wang Thinking About Her Husband. The singer had a small, unkempt beard and wore a ragged tunic. He accompanied his song with slender and graceful gestures. The young Chinese and Manchu women, who could be distinguished by their clothes, all laughed heartily and some even blushed.

Li Mubai hadn't been in Beijing long enough to understand the songs with the accent of the capital. He preferred to turn around and observe the groups of ducks swimming over the water. They took flight with their delicate white wings in all directions, or remained floating peacefully like small boats. Li Mubai suddenly recalled a scene when he was seven or eight years old at the Poyang Lake (91) with his parents and Jiang Nanhe, Southern Crane. The latter was really a very good swimmer, in the waters of the lake he was as agile as a fish. He said he could dive very deep or he could open his eyes underwater to see fish. He had taught his father to swim, who was doing well too. His parents were long dead now, and Jiang Nanhe must have been over sixty, if he was still in this world. Li Mubai reflected as he gazed at the increasingly clear water. The ducks were more numerous and the willows on the banks more dense. The few farm hamlets looked like paintings. After sailing a little longer, the boat found itself facing a bridge. The singer finished his tune and held out his hand to ask the passengers for a donation. De Xiaofeng handed him some coins.

"We have arrived!" He said to Li Mubai, taking his arm.

Li Mubai straightened up. The boat docked and the two men dismounted. Li Mubai found the place pleasant and very busy. The water, like a mirror, was pure and limpid. On the banks, the lush green willows, like green clouds, cast a thick shade. Under the coolness of that shade stretched many huts in which one could sit and drink tea. Well-off people had settled down to rest for a while. Around the cabins, many merchants offered different foods and sweets, and several artists gave singing performances. Walkers came and went. The crowd was very diverse, made up of young and old, poor and rich. Manchu women in all their pageantry and young

girls with long braids attracted particular attention. A few high rollers, scoundrels or thugs pursued these young women by harassing them or pushing them aside. Li Mubai was shocked. "In Beijing, a city trampled by the Emperor's feet, how can these individuals behave so rudely! He thought.

Shortly after, De Xiaofeng addressed his friend:

"Let's not follow these restless people and instead go and rest in one of these tea shacks."

They entered one of the huts. As soon as De Xiaofeng appeared in the room, he was greeted respectfully.

"Welcome De the fifth lord!"

De Xiaofeng recognized Xiao Zhang, a man from the Jihua Gate, and smiled at him:

"Can you find us places?"

Xiao Zhang set them up in a light and spacious place. He stripped them of their overcoats and offered them something to cool their faces. Then he brought them a teapot of the best longjing tea (92) he had, as well as a plate of peanuts and another of pumpkin seeds. Li Mubai was fanning himself while drinking his tea. De Xiaofeng was smoking his water pipe as he watched the crowd of passers-by beyond the flowering hedge.

Li Mubai saw three men arriving west of a small hill dressed in unlined ramie robes. The first, short, tanned and rather thin, looked great. Two servants followed him, each carrying a bag of money. More than twenty beggars, men and women, followed suit and begged them for alms. The two servants took the money out of the bags and distributed it to them. The beggars then gathered around them, more and more numerous, so that the servants were quickly overwhelmed. The man they were accompanying continued to advance, assuming great airs. The thugs watched him like a prince, and came forward with a confused smile to greet him very respectfully. The man paid them no attention; his light gauze garment fluttering in the wind, waving his round silk fan, he wore a



distinct expression of superiority. Li Mubai wondered who this person was and if he really was in high place.

De Xiaofeng then exclaimed:

"Brother, look! It is Huang Jibei, the Lean Buddha Amida!"

De Xiaofeng straightened up and smiled at Huang Jibei who, seeing him, walked over to the tea house to smile back and bend slightly. De Xiaofeng, all smiles, bowed too and exclaimed:

"So, big brother Huang, are we going for a walk?"

Huang Jibei, who didn't seem to have heard correctly, nodded however and continued on his way.

De Xiaofeng seemed surprised that Huang Jibei did not come and say a few words to him and was embarrassed in front of Li Mubai. Embarrassed, he sat down and remained dubious and silent. Li Mubai, resentful, exclaimed:

"Huang Jibei, Lean Buddha Amida is that kind of person; of great class, certainly, but rather proud!"

"He is not at all proud and we are on good terms," replied De Xiaofeng. "But it is true that we do not see each other very often, and perhaps he has a certain resentment towards me."

Li Mubai, intrigued, asked:

"What is it about?"

"To tell the truth it's not really resentment, but he must still be angry with me a little. I had a niece who was married to the Hong family from the Beixin Bridge area. Her new sister-in-law brutalized her, and she succumbed to this mistreatment. Not only did the Hong family not perform the funeral properly, but they cursed the deceased. I knew it and it made me very angry. I then sent men to wreak havoc on the Hong family, and someone eventually mediated between the two families to settle the differences. The story settled down, and then I learned that Huang Jibei was a close friend of the Hong family. He said one day to a common acquaintance that I had

made him uncomfortable and that he resented me."

"When the affair broke," exclaimed Li Mubai, "he had only to introduce himself as mediator in this case; why does he carry on like this, it is not correct!"

"You do not know the temperament of the inhabitants of Beijing, they are very picky. Huang Jibei comes from a very wealthy Beijing family and excels in martial arts. East of town, everyone respects him. Only I, whose family is not as famous as his and whose martial art is far inferior to his, I also have many friends in town and also outside, where I even enjoy a greater prestige than him; and he must envy me a little for that. We've known each other for over ten years, but we've never really had the time to talk to each other."

Li Mubai couldn't help but be angry; he tells him:

"Huang Jibei is really just a mean man. If one of these days I see him again, I'll put him back in his place, in your honor!"

De Xiaofeng stopped him on the spot:

"Certainly not! He envies me, okay, but I don't mean to offend him in any way. Moreover, our two families work together and have very good relations. If we fall out it could be really ugly and no one will get along; especially since recently he has been on very good terms with the young Marquis Qiu. We must not get carried away, otherwise we will offend them both."

"I was not talking about offending them," smiles Li Mubai. "Rather, I thought I would take a close look at their martial arts. If he turns out to be stronger than me, of course I won't say you're my friend."

"Brother, you are young; I can see that you do not know the prestige and the power of Huang Jibei. He has many informants under his command. Our friendship is recent but he will learn it sooner or later, without however knowing what kind of man you are. He has a slight grudge against me, but we're not going to fall out either. No one wants to intentionally upset the other; if you provoke it, it will inevitably go wrong. In a pinch, it might be okay if he brutalizes and humiliates you. But if you win, you can be sure that he won't

let you settle in Beijing. Brother, you are young and vigorous, wherever you go you will do well. For now, you are here and it is not easy for you, but wait patiently for an opportunity to arise and allow you to set up a business in the capital. Why would you get carried away with this matter, which would force you to oppose him? Especially since it is not some local bandit or tyrant!"

Seeing that De Xiaofeng was sincerely trying to persuade him not to do anything, Li Mubai could only resign himself, not wishing to get him into trouble.

"Big brother, don't worry," he said to him, "I'll never embarrass you!"

"I'm not at all afraid that you'll embarrass me, I just want you to realize what could be going on and who you are dealing with."

"Yes," Li Mubai agreed, sighing. "I know my big brother is watching over me."

This conversation with Li Mubai worried De Xiaofeng, who began to worry about him. He drank another bowl of tea, looked at the time and said:

"In a moment, we'll have to go home. Tonight I invite you to eat at my place, you will see what the inhabitants of Beijing usually eat, what do you think?"

"I think I'm starting to get used to the dishes of the capital," said Li Mubai, laughing. "What am I going to do when I get home?"

"Don't worry, you just have to come and live with me with your family, and we'll eat and drink together! You will still have to participate a little financially; we can't hope for better, right?"

"What family are you talking about," laughs Li Mubai, "I'm all alone!"

De Xiaofeng was very surprised. He simply loaded his pipe and lit it with a piece of paper, then asked:

"Joke aside, are you married or not?"

"But no!" Li Mubai replied.

De Xiaofeng seemed to disbelieve him and continued:

"In your village, shouldn't you get married around twelve or thirteen?"

"It's true, in the countryside we usually get married quite early. Only I'm a special case," Li Mubai sighed. "Let's enjoy a little more then go home; during the dinner in your honorable residence, I will tell you in detail the history of my family. You're the first friend I have, so I have to retrace my life for you. If it was someone else, I wouldn't talk about it."

"All right," said De Xiaofeng. "Today we spend the day having fun and tonight, after the meal, we will go for a walk in town and we can even return to see Xianniang."

Li Mubai smiled at this proposal. De Xiaofeng paid and they left the tea house. They strolled around Erzha for a while, then took the boat back to Jihua Gate, where Fuzi was already waiting for them.

The two men got into the cart and drove straight to De Xiaofeng's place. He begged Li Mubai to wait for him in the yard so that he could warn his wife and mother. Then they settled in the reception hall where they tasted a watermelon. Soon after, the servants set the table and Li Mubai and De Xiaofeng came face to face to eat and drink. Li Mubai told him in detail about his childhood and his experiences. He explained to him that he wanted to marry a woman who was both extremely beautiful and talented, and mentioned the story with young Yu Xiulian. He was overjoyed and overwhelmed with enthusiasm when he spoke about Jiang Nanhe and Ji Guangjie and couldn't help but cry bitterly when he mentioned his lost parents so young. He then recounted how he had fought in a duel with the young Xiulian and how, on his way to Beijing, he had met her and her family, and had helped her and her father to fight personal enemies. He finally explained that Xiulian was already promised to someone and that he was both happy and desperate. At the end of his story, he supported his chin in one hand and lifted his glass with the other; Leaning over the table, his brow furrowed, he remained silent.

De Xiaofeng was happy to hear his story but also felt some grief for his friend. After a good while he said:

"I listened to you and, in my eyes, you are truly an exceptional knight! For your wedding, you don't have to worry; this Yu Xiulian is engaged to a man who has gone far from home without giving any news, she is not going to live like a widow in her in-laws. I am going to take a tour of Xuanhua's government and meet old Meng and Lady Yu. I will be the go-between for you and young Xiulian and it will be settled! For now, we cannot say that the young girl has gone to her husband, so we are not talking about remarriage at all, the old guard Meng cannot indefinitely delay the marriage of this young girl."

Li Mubai waved his hand several times:

"Even if I was certain that the man Xiulian is to marry is dead and that she wants me well, I could not marry her; otherwise I would be a miserable womanizer. I admire Xiulian but have no hope. She can only be my little sister and not my wife, otherwise I would not be worthy of Yu Xiongyuan!"

De Xiaofeng knew that Li Mubai was steadfast and righteous, with a very clear sense of justice. He could never marry a woman already promised to someone else, even if he had to suffer for it all his life. De Xiaofeng couldn't help but sigh:

"Brother, I understand you very well, let's not talk about it any more, but if you think that there is really nothing to do, you must also stop thinking about it so as not to make yourself unhappy. In time, if I meet a young girl who can please you, we will talk about it again. What's urgent for now is not your wedding anyway!"

"You're absolutely right, big brother!" Li Mubai nodded.

The two men continued to drink and chat sincerely until nightfall, and the lamps in the reception hall were lit. Li Mubai was extremely sad and tried to drown his grief in alcohol. At the end of the meal, he was half drunk. His body was hot and he felt extremely gloomy. He had only one desire: to find an opponent and give free rein to his talent. The table was cleared, and Li Mubai wanted to go

see Xianniang. De Xiaofeng warns him:

"You're drunk, you should go home and get some rest. I don't feel like going out tonight, someone is going to take you back to the hostel."

Li Mubai nodded without actually understanding what his friend had told him. De Xiaofeng told Shou'er to have a cart prepared and helped Li Mubai put on his overcoat. Soon after, he helped him get into the cart and Li Mubai returned.

Li Mubai was dizzy. Not knowing how long he had been traveling, he questioned Fuzi:

"Are we finally in Qianmen?"

"You go out?"

"Take me to Hanjatan alley, I won't go back to the hostel right away."

Fuzi nodded but thought to himself: "Completely drunk, he's going to run girls again. Our Master's friend truly leads a dissolute life."

Li Mubai, tossed about by the cart, suddenly felt extremely sad. He was dying to smash the vehicle and run away. He told himself that if he saw Xianniang he would burst into tears, then pull out his sword and slit his throat in her boudoir.

Shortly after, the cart stopped.

"You have arrived!" Exclaimed Fuzi.

Li Mubai got out of the cart. With a heavy and staggering step, he entered the House of Sumptuous Treasures with a thousand aligned lanterns (93). The voice of one of the employees is heard:

"A client for Cuixian! Lord Li!"

## Chapter 11

*Drunk, he talks extravagantly,*

*In the house of pleasures, he is ready to smile;*

*A simple clash calls for revenge,*

*The precious sword confronts the Little Lance.*

Xianniang was moping in her living room facing the lamp. She was pondering her fate when the servant's voice rang out announcing Li Mubai's visit. She straightened up and her mother left the room to greet him. Li Mubai was staggering but still managed to climb upstairs. Xianniang immediately noticed that he smelled of alcohol. She went to meet him smiling and said:

"Where did you drink to get drunk like that?"

Li Mubai, not very talkative, simply said:

"De Xiaofeng is not here?"

"No," replied Xianniang, "he did not come."

Li Mubai seemed to recover for a moment.

"Ah yes, that's right," he exclaimed, "I've just arrived from his place.

"What state have you been in," Xianniang said. "You are completely drunk and your mind is very confused!"

Li Mubai didn't seem to want to admit it and said:

"I'm not drunk, I'm sad!"

He tried to lean on a chair and almost fell. Xianniang caught up with him in time.

"Sit down properly," she said, frowning. "I'll serve you some iced sour plum! Mom, bring me a bowl!"

Lady Xie looked upset, she quickly returned with a bowl of the famous drink. Xianniang brought it to Li Mubai's lips and gave him a sip. The young man burped twice and shook his hand:

"I don't drink anymore!" He protested.

Xianniang sat down next to him and started joking and chatting with him. Li Mubai suddenly exhaled a long sigh and said:

"Xianniang, if I'm here today, it's not for your services, but it's because you and I are both poor wretches."

Xianniang was struck by these words, as if Li Mubai touched a sensitive spot; tears began to flow down the young woman's cheeks. Li Mubai then grabbed her wrist firmly and angrily exclaimed:

"You, such a beauty, and I, such a hero, we fail to make our dreams come true because we find ourselves trampled by the scoundrels and the boors!"

Xianniang wiped her eyes and laughed:

"Lord Li, you are really drunk! I understand absolutely nothing of what you are telling me!"

Coming from the courtyard, the voice of a young servant suddenly resounds:

"A ticket for Cuixian!"

Lady Xie came out, and reappeared with the little red paper in her hand, which she handed to Xianniang saying:

"His Excellency Xu and Lord Lu San are at the Guanghe Residence, they beg you to join them soon!"

Xianniang glanced at the note and frowned.

"My word, they too are drunk, ask me to come to eat at this hour! Lord Li," she continued, "I help you to go to my bed so that you rest for a while; I have to go out but I will be back soon."



Li Mubai wanted to go back to the hostel, but he was really unable to walk. He replied in a confused and neglected manner:

"Good, yes, go without me!"

Xianniang took off his overcoat and supported him by the arm to the bedroom where she placed him on the bed and covered him with a red satin sheet. She burned incense against the mosquitoes and closed the curtain then changed and left accompanied by her mother to the meeting.

Li Mubai, sitting on Xianniang's bed, felt oppressed and dizzy. He was scorching hot and couldn't lie down. Several times he had to sit down, staying that way for a long time. Suddenly he bent over and began to vomit, resounding "wa!". He vomited several times, regurgitating everything he had eaten and drunk at De Xiaofeng's house. Li Mubai quickly felt much better, as if he was coming to his senses a little.

Bursts of laughter arose from the many rooms of the house, to which was mingled the delicate sound of a song which said:

They say you shouldn't worry too much,

Because worry disturbs the mind.

Since you left,

I don't drink tea anymore,

I have no more appetite,

And I have no more desire!

Li Mubai realized he was in Xianniang's room. Heaven, he said to himself, I threw up at her house! He raised the lamp slightly and found that he had returned everything he had in his stomach on the nice clean sheets and the red satin blanket. Li Mubai opened the curtain and walked out of the bedroom; he was able to discover that his clothes were also stained and was extremely embarrassed. He used the tea to rinse his mouth and suddenly heard a noise in the hallway. Xianniang and her mother were already coming back. Li

Mubai was really ashamed, so he stopped Xianniang and said to her:

"You can't go to your room, I soiled all your bedding with vomit!"

Xianniang glanced at Li Mubai's clothes and said:

"If Lord Li has vomited, it doesn't matter, I'll have someone clean up."

Xianniang walked to her room and laughed at the damage:

"Lord Li threw up all the discontent he had in his heart!"

Li Mubai suddenly thought back to the words he had said to the young woman while he was drunk and instantly blushed. He was really ashamed.

A boy came to clean the room. Xianniang served Li Mubai some tea and said to him while looking at his clothes:

"How are we going to do this? I have nothing to give you so that you can change yourself. I'll send someone to your hostel to pick up some stuff!"

"No need," replied Li Mubai. "I'll go home."

Li Mubai put his long overcoat over his shoulders and took out five one-row bills which he put on the table.

"I got all your sheets dirty for you," he told her. "Take that money and buy yourself new ones!"

Xianniang collected the tickets and kept only one. She handed the rest to Li Mubai.

"I can't accept everything," she told him in an almost solemn attitude. "What are sheets? If you compensate us, it's because you simply despise us!"

Li Mubai, confused, collected the money, not knowing what to do. Lamp in hand, Xianniang then smiled gracefully at him. Stepping

forward to grab his hand, she said, looking at him with affectionate eyes:

"Don't think about that again, okay?"

She glanced at her mother and the young boy who was cleaning up before continuing in a soft voice:

"By suggesting that you rest on my bed, I was not afraid of that!"

Li Mubai did not know what to answer. After a while he took his leave. Xianniang hesitated, but, betrayed by her behavior which clearly showed her attachment to Li Mubai, she finally shouted at him: "See you tomorrow!"

Li Mubai went down to the courtyard; as always, Xianniang was leaning against the railing and watching him go.

He left the House of Sumptuous Treasures and hired a cart back to Xiheyang. At the inn, he changed and washed his face. He really regretted getting drunk like that. He found he had fallen very low and made up his mind never to drink so much again, for if he were to get a job later he would be unable to take responsibility for it. So he decided to take control, then went to bed.

The next day after lunch, Li Mubai went to his uncle Qi Dianchen's home. He asked him why he hadn't come to visit him in recent days, which embarrassed Li Mubai, giving him a bad conscience. He's blushing.

"I must have caught something, and I haven't been very well the last few days.

"It's true, it looks like you've lost weight again," Qi Dianchen told him. "Okay, I have to talk to you."

Li Mubai was surprised at these words and wondered what it was about.

"It bothers me that you are staying in an inn," his uncle told him. "Your room should be small, the other guests should be noisy, and you shouldn't be quiet. And then, if you can't find a job and

stay there for two more weeks, you'll have spent all the money you had set aside. Yesterday I went to Faming Temple, east of here, in Prime Minister's Lane. I met the superior of the bonzerie, who is called Guang Yuan. I told him that I had a student relative who had come to the capital to find a job and who was looking for a room for a few days. The superior was very understanding and told me that they had an unoccupied room in the west wing. You can go there when you want, he reserves it for you. In return, you just have to copy them some classics and they can even pay you a little. The temple is large and it is a very quiet place. It goes without saying that you will not have to pay for your room, it will always be more advantageous than the hostel. The temple offers two meals each day, but you can easily find food in the surrounding area. So you won't have to spend too much money."

"Very well," agreed Li Mubai, "I will go home and prepare my things and I am going to settle there tomorrow!"

"You should first meet the superior of the temple and see the room in the process," said Qi Dianchen. "If it leaks or is too wet, it won't fit!"

Qi Dianchen begged his servant Laisheng to take his business card and accompany Li Mubai to Faming Monastery.

They arrived at the temple soon after and met the superior Guang Yuan. He was over sixty years old. He was skeletal and really looked like an old Buddhist monk. He begged one of his disciples, named Zhitong, to accompany Li Mubai to see the room. The monastery was indeed very large and had not seemed to be maintained for several years. Little incense burned, it was not to have rich benefactors and seemed to be abandoned. There couldn't be more than a dozen monks in all. Heading towards the west wing, Li Mubai only passed three temples, but could not say which gods they were dedicated to. Further on, under two porches, were gathered a dozen tombs, then were two unoccupied rooms. Li Mubai's bedroom consisted of a kang, a table, and two stools.

"The roof doesn't leak when it rains," Monk Zhitong informed him.

Li Mubai found that the atmosphere in the monastery was peaceful

and the courtyard in front of its spacious room; he could practice there with the sword when he had nothing to do. He informed the young monk that he would move in the next day. Li Mubai and Laisheng left the temple, and Li Mubai told the servant to go back. On leaving the alley of the temple, he came to a large avenue which he strolled along. Now that he was going to settle in this temple, it was absolutely necessary that he resume assiduously training in martial arts; he would continue to frequent De Xiaofeng regularly and visit Xianniang less often. He thought back to the night before and the young woman's refusal to take his money. Xianniang's affection for him troubled him. His footsteps led him past a silk shop.

Xianniang was combing her hair when Li Mubai arrived with the beautiful colorful satin fabrics.

"Lord Li," the young woman exclaimed, "but what is it?"

"This story yesterday made me really uncomfortable," Li Mubai replied. "So I bought you some satin chi. These are not excellent quality fabrics, you can do what you want with them!"

"Let me guess," Xianniang said. "You offer me these few zhang (95) fabrics to compensate us! Only if you compensate us now, I'm sure you won't come to see us again!"

Faced with Xianniang's eloquence and insight, Li Mubai blushed and forced himself to smile:

"Don't say that, come on, that's not true. I am not staying but I will come back in the evening. Every day, I will visit you at least once!"

Li Mubai was about to leave when he was called back by Xianniang who, with a nice smile, asked him very seriously:

"Is it true? Can you promise me?"

Li Mubai regretted his enthusiasm and said to her with a smile:

"Rest easy, as long as I have time, I'll come see you, unless some urgent business holds me back. And if I can't come, be sure I'll be thinking of you anyway!"

Lady Xie walked out of the room. Xianniang grabbed Li Mubai's shoulders and lifted her head. Her eyes were red and she suddenly started to cry, resting her face on the young man's chest. Li Mubai frowned and looked down at the young woman's delicate bun. He felt tense and very sad, and tried to get over his feelings. He took the young woman's face in his hands and wiped her eyes. He sighed softly then said:

"You're going to hurt yourself like this, you must never do that again! I understand your dismay. Later, when we have time, we'll talk about it, and I'll find a solution."

At these words, Xianniang's tears redoubled; Li Mubai was very moved and failed to console her.

Voices arose outside, including that of Lady Xie. Xianniang gestured Li Mubai to a seat, begging him to sit down, then she quickly settled in front of her dressing table to powder herself and arrange her hair. Li Mubai, sitting in front of the mirror, observed Xianniang's lovely face. Her eyes were still wet, which saddened him greatly. Lady Xie finally lifted the curtain and entered the room.

"I have just been told that several men fought on Qianmen Avenue," she said. "They took out knives and one of them was seriously injured!"

Li Mubai listened carefully to Lady Xie, but did not ask her for more details, as the matter did not concern him. He sat there for a while. He had a lot to say to Xianniang but remained silent. He finally took his leave. As he was about to leave, Xianniang all smiles said to him:

"I'm already longing to see you again tonight!"

Li Mubai left the House of Sumptuous Treasures and walked towards Xiheyan. He thought about what he had decided to do after moving, as he walked, and finally gave up keeping his distance from Xianniang. She was a lovely young girl who certainly had many worries and a difficult life. I would like to watch over her, only my current situation leaves something to be desired, he said to himself. Will I have enough strength to pull her out of there? On the

other hand, can a young man like me give up his ambitions because of his feelings towards a young woman? Li Mubai continued his thought, "If I found the money to marry Xianniang, and she officially became my wife, I wouldn't mind. But I'm afraid my uncle, Qi Dianchen and my relatives won't accept it."

Along the way, he thought about it all and sighed. He finally arrived at the hostel and saw De Xiaofeng's car. As soon as he walked through the door, an employee greeted him and said:

"Lord Li, go quickly to your room! Lord De fought men in Qianmen and received a blow!"

Li Mubai was stunned. So it was De Xiaofeng, he thought. I hope he is not seriously injured! Li Mubai came running into the room, De Xiaofeng was sitting on his bed. His clothes were torn and his right arm was stained with blood. As soon as he saw Li Mubai, he exclaimed:

"Where have you been?"

"I went to visit my uncle. Big brother, who did you fight against? Is your injury serious?"

De Xiaofeng bared his arm to show it to his friend. It had a deep gash from which a lot of blood was flowing. De Xiaofeng did not show his pain, however.

"There were about ten of them that surrounded my cart. I fought head-to-head with my saber. They injured my arm but I managed to hit two; I sent all the others to the yamen, in front of the imperial censor!" he cried with a victorious smile.

"What did these men want? Was it a revenge?"

"I'll give it to you in a thousand," replied De Xiaofeng. "The other day at the Yanxi opera house, didn't I knock a big guy in the dust to help Iron Leg Enzi? This guy happens to be the third of the Feng brothers. His younger brother is Feng Long from the Chunyuan escort agency. The Feng brothers are well known and all excel in martial arts; originally from Shen Prefecture, they are called the

Five Feng Tigers. The eldest is no longer of this world; the second is called Feng De, the "Silver Horse", he opened an armed escort agency in Zhangjiakou. I fought against the third brother, whose name is Feng Huai, called "Iron Staff". It has hardly been more than a month since he arrived in the capital and he is staying with his younger brother, Feng Long, known as "the Little Lance (96)". He was the one who founded the Chunyuan escort agency six or seven years ago. He is extremely gifted in martial arts, it is even said that with his short lance he could compete with the General with the Silver Lance. The most terrible of the brothers remains the fourth, Feng Mao, at the Golden Sabers. He is currently the best-known man in all of Zhili Province, even Huang Jibei, the Lean Buddha Amida and Qiu Guangchao, the General with the Silver Spear, would not dare to offend him. The guards of the Chunyuan Agency, whose name makes people tremble on all sides, often create stories but no one ever tells them anything, because everyone is afraid of Feng Mao!" The most terrible of the brothers remains the fourth, Feng Mao, the "Golden Sabers". He is currently the best-known man in all of Zhili Province, even Huang Jibei, the Lean Buddha Amida and Qiu Guangchao, the General with the Silver Spear, would not dare to offend him. The guards from the Chunyuan Agency, whose name makes people tremble on all sides, often create trouble but no one ever says anything, because everyone is afraid of Feng Mao!"

Li Mubai listened to his friend talk about the fame of Feng Mao and was indignant:

"Today, on Qianmen Avenue, was he there?"

"No, it is not against him that I fought, otherwise I would have tasted much more than that! Furious at his loss, his brother told the whole agency that I had offended him. I really regret this fight because I never wanted to become the enemy of the Feng brothers. In recent days, I have refrained from going to the south of the city; firstly because I was not in great shape, and secondly to avoid any trouble with them. Today, I couldn't keep still and didn't want to stay at home. You were really drunk last night and Fuzi told me that you still went to the House of Sumptuous Treasures. I was afraid that you had caused some disturbance in your drunkenness and I decided to visit you. I took a saber with me, to protect myself



just in case. I never would have believed that as I passed the Qianmen Bridge, the guards from the Chunyuan Agency would surround me like this, all armed with swords or sticks. None of the Feng brothers were with them. At first I tried to reason with them, but they wanted to fight at all costs. There were many passers-by and I started to get angry; we then came to blows. I took a hit, but they paid even more than me. Officers then disembarked and I happened to know them; they stopped them all. This will only increase the hatred of the Feng brothers! It is inevitable that they are looking for me now, I will not be able to show myself in town often after this incident."

De Xiaofeng looked worried and dejected as he held a blood-soaked handkerchief to his arm. He continued :

"I sent Fuzi to get me more clothes and some ointment for the stab wounds. Brother, I, De Xiaofeng, the Iron Hand, am a brave man. It's nothing. If they had cut my arm off and I let out a single moan, I wouldn't be worthy of being a hero anymore. I am not afraid of any of the guards from the Chunyuan Agency, not even Feng Long, the Little Lance. Only Feng Mao worries me. He knows several famous Jianghu bandits, and if he came to pick me up, I would have great difficulty standing up to them!"

Li Mubai couldn't contain his anger, he said to him with an icy smile:

"Don't worry, big brother! Whether it's Feng Long or Feng Mao, if they're looking for you, tell me, I'm not afraid of any!"

"Of course I'm going to need your help!"

Li Mubai then explained to his friend that he was going to move to Faming Temple. De Xiaofeng exclaimed:

"That's fine, you couldn't stay at the hostel indefinitely, it was only temporary! I would have liked to suggest that you come and live with me, but I was afraid you might find it inappropriate."

"Tomorrow I am moving to the monastery," replied Li Mubai, "but we can talk about it again."

At that moment, Fuzi and Shou'er, accompanied by two other servants, arrived at the inn and handed the clothes and the ointment to their master.

"Why did you bring these two?" he told them. "Who did you leave at home?"

"Your mother and wife heard that you were injured," Shou'er replied. "They are very worried and ask you to come home quickly. They told us to go out to look for you."

"Go together for what?" asked De Xiaofeng, smiling coldly. "You think you are serving me as bodyguard!"

De Xiaofeng asked Shou'er to apply the ointment to him. Fuzi and the other two men withdrew.

When Shou'er was done, De Xiaofeng changed. He seemed to be in no pain, it was as if his worries and anger were gone. He didn't seem in any hurry to leave, however. He chatted with Li Mubai of Xianniang, and learned that he had vomited the day before on her bed and that he had brought her some satin fabrics today. De Xiaofeng laughed loudly:

"I'm away for two days and you both become so familiar. In a few days, I will have to go on a mission to Dongling (97); when I get back, I'm afraid you will have rented a room and moved in together!"

Li Mubai was a little confused.

"Tomorrow," he said, "I am moving to the monastery and I will not go to see her again!"

"You move to the temple and will be far from home. I don't think you're going to shave your head and be a monk, so who could possibly care to know that you're loitering around brothels?"

"That's not it," explained Li Mubai. "I understand now that you should not go too much in this kind of place, otherwise, it quickly becomes impossible to detach yourself from certain obligations."

De Xiaofeng listened silently, a small smile on his lips, as if he was calculating something. Suddenly, Fuzi and the two servants rushed into the room, completely panicked.

"Lord," said Fuzi to him, "one of the hostel employees just told me that the boss of the Chunyuan escort agency, accompanied by several guards, all armed with swords and sticks, are at the eastern entrance of the alley! They are waiting for you, that's for sure!"

De Xiaofeng was extremely surprised. Li Mubai went to untie his precious sword from the wall and said:

"I'm going to go and greet them!"

"Brother," said De Xiaofeng, "don't worry and let me find a solution!"

"What solution?" Li Mubai exclaimed furiously. "I'm going to fight them and crush them, that's all! They have humiliated you and are preventing you from roaming the city at your ease!"

"How about I go find the authorities?" Fuzi offered.

"If I use the power of the authorities to intimidate them," De Xiaofeng smiles coldly, "my name is no longer De!"

He quickly made a decision and exclaimed:

"Alright, let's meet them, I'll talk to them! Brother," he said to Li Mubai, "will you take me for a walk?"

He then turned to Fuzi, Shou'er and the two other servants, and said to them:

"I forbid you to interfere in this matter. You stay nearby to watch, and if they attack you, I forbid you to retaliate!"

Fuzi and Shou'er were white with fear. Li Mubai, armed with his precious sword, said to De Xiaofeng:

"Big brother, you're hurt, how could you go and provoke them again! Better that I go alone and run over them!"

"Don't worry, if it's really Feng Long who is there, I'll just go see him; he who founded an agency, I will manage to talk to him!"

De Xiaofeng put his overcoat on his shoulders and left the room, followed by Li Mubai.

The keeper and the employees stared at De Xiaofeng, who was leaving the inn, all knew he was going to meet Feng Long, the Little Lance, and expected a fierce fight between the two men; they found the people who accompanied him to be truly deserving. Li Mubai, his braid rolled up and sword in hand, particularly caught their attention.

De Xiaofeng passed the east entrance to the alley, still followed by his servants, and was greeted by a dozen fellows, some dressed in short sets, others shirtless. They waddled towards him, Feng Long at their head. This one was in his thirties. He was not very tall, with a tanned chest and face, and wore a light silk ensemble. Looking terrifying, he carried no weapon, but one of his men kept his red fringed spear wrapped in a cloth close at hand. Feng Long walked over to De Xiaofeng, staring at him.

"Stay there, you!" he said to him.

De Xiaofeng stopped and gave him an icy smile.

"Guard Feng," he said, "let's be courteous! We both know the same people, can't we get along?"

"Get along? At the theater, you messed up one of my brothers, who still can't get up from his bed; a while ago, you injured two of my men and you relied on the official authorities to imprison the ten others. And now you just want us, the Feng brothers, to leave this matter out of Jianghu. I am going to speak to you very frankly: my agency is dishonored and we will fight to the death for it! You may well be the famous fifth lord De, working in the inner courtyard of the palace, but I will strike you down anyway! Approach, this place will be our tomb together!"

While speaking, Feng Long had retrieved his spear. As he finished his sentence, he raised his weapon and lunged at De Xiaofeng. Li

Mubai rushed over to block the spear with his precious sword. Feng Long, mad with rage, stared at Li Mubai and exclaimed:

"What are you doing? You dare to interfere in our business!"

"De Xiaofeng is my brother," he said, "if you insult him, you attack me too! If you want to kill him, you must first defeat my precious sword!"

Feng Long seemed to hesitate for a moment. They were surrounded by a crowd of restless spectators, and among them, a few stepped forward to try to reason with them. Feng Long was stamping his feet and getting angry, he had no choice but to fight with De Xiaofeng. De Xiaofeng, seeing that he could not avoid the fight, asked Li Mubai to step back and addressed Feng Long:

"If you want to fight against me, know that I am not afraid of you! However, Qianmen Avenue is not a suitable place for a duel to the death. Our two corpses across the road would prevent passers-by and vehicles from moving normally and that would not be appropriate. Let's find another place for what we have to do!"

Feng Long feared that this was an ambush on De Xiaofeng's part and he already saw the authorities at the place planned to pick them up; he exclaimed:

"Okay, so would you dare to go to the lowlands south of town?"

"There is nowhere I dare not go," replied De Xiaofeng. "If you choose this place, we'll go there!"

"So let's go," exclaimed Feng Long, "waving his spear. Those who do not follow are not men!"

De Xiaofeng, pale with anger, got into the cart and said to his friend:

"Brother Li, let's go!"

Li Mubai, sword in hand, sat down with him. Feng Long's angry band followed suit and a few spectators followed them too; all took the direction of the lowlands to the south of the capital.

Shou'er and the two other servants were further back, terrified.

"Our master and Lord Li will only be two to fight against all these men," said Shou'er, "they are going to take a beating!"

"It would be better to go home and tell his wife," replied one of the servants.

"It won't do any good," Shou'er replied. "I will most certainly be insulted by our master, but I will still go and warn the imperial censor, Sieur Zhang, so that he sends guards to calm their quarrel and thus avoid the fight."

Shou'er took advantage of De Xiaofeng's inattention to slip away and go and warn the yamen.

The troops arrived in the southern lowlands, on a large wasteland. Feng Long pointed his lance at De Xiaofeng's vehicle and exclaimed:

"It will be perfect here! Get out of the cart!"

He had barely finished his sentence when Li Mubai jumped out, his precious sword in his hand. He walked straight to Feng Long and said:

"My brother De is injured in his right arm, if you beat him you will have no merit; rather, let's both fight!"

He was already on guard, sword pointed at Feng Long.

"What is your name?" This one asked him.

Li Mubai slapped his chest and replied:

"My name is Li Mubai, I am from Zhili Province of Nangong District, De Xiaofeng is my sworn brother. Whether it is you or your brother Feng Mao, the Golden Sabers or some Skinny Buddha Amida or General with the Silver Lance, whoever offends my brother will have to feel my precious sword!"

De Xiaofeng had just got out of the cart and exclaimed:

"He is right; If you can beat him, I will bow down to the ground at your feet in front of everyone!"

Feng Long stamped his foot and exclaimed:

"Okay!"

Then he addressed those present:

"Step back a bit!" Take a good look at how I'm going to crush this youngster!"

He straightened his weapon and lunged at Li Mubai. The spear struck the sword. Li Mubai then hugged him very closely. The movements of his sword emitted a powerful breath and forced Feng Long to step back. He could only desperately parry the blows. Li Mubai's technique was too strange, sometimes he attacked from the front, sometimes from the sides, and Feng Long did not know where to turn. He was just defending himself and couldn't manage to land a single blow at him. Li Mubai's sword then came slicing down his back. Feng Long screamed in pain and let go of his spear. He collapsed to the ground. Then resounded the cheers of the crowd.

Feng Long's men, all armed with swords and sticks, rushed at Li Mubai. Li Mubai whirled his sword and provocatively exclaimed:

"Let those who want to die approach! I warn you, in Raoyang District, I injured He Jian'e, nicknamed the Demoness; in Shahe, I crushed Wei Fengxiang, The One Who Surpasses Lü Bu. I don't care if you are ten, or ten more, I wouldn't be worthy to be Ji Guangjie's disciple if I was afraid of you!"

Hearing Li Mubai say that he had come to grips with Wei Fengxiang, the guards from the Chunyuan Agency felt their hands shaking.

Feng Long had just been supported by his men. A lot of blood was flowing from his wound and his face was contorted in pain. He now understood that Li Mubai was extremely talented in martial arts and stopped his men in their tracks. He said to them:

"Ask him where he lives!"

The crowd of spectators then stared at young Li Mubai, who exclaimed, slapping his chest:

"I reside at Faming Temple in Prime Minister's Lane; go back and tell Feng Mao, I think the address is pretty accurate!"

Feng Long had already moved away. His guards followed him, looking utterly dejected.

The authorities were already in the distance and the crowd instantly dispersed in confusion. De Xiaofeng went to meet them. He greeted them respectfully and said:

"Nothing happened! Feng Long, the Little Lance, from the Chunyuan escort agency wanted to fight against me. But my brother Li taught him good manners and he just ran off with his men."

Seeing Shou'er beside them, he scolded him:

"Why did you go bother these gentlemen with such a small affair!"

"For a few days," explained one of the officers, "these local thugs from the south of the city think they are allowed anything and they are untenable! I heard, Lord De, that you were injured earlier on Qianmen Avenue!"

De Xiaofeng bared his right arm and showed them his injury.

"It's nothing. It'll be healed in a few days. Gentlemen, you can go home, we disturbed you for nothing, but I will come to thank you one of these days!"

"Let's see, how can you say that, it's useless!" Exclaimed the officers in one voice, before leaving the scene.

De Xiaofeng glared at Shou'er but didn't say anything to him; he preferred to address Li Mubai and smiled again:

"Brother, luckily you were here today!" Only, perhaps you shouldn't have mentioned the Skinny Buddha Amida or the General with the Silver Lance. You don't realize they have eyes and ears everywhere. In the midst of the crowd were many people under their command;



if they repeat it to them, you can be sure that something more is going to happen!

"Don't worry," Li Mubai replied icily. "Thanks to today, everyone could clearly understand my name and where I live; if they're not happy, they know where to find me!"

De Xiaofeng knew the power and mastery of the martial arts of his friend, who therefore had a certain pride, and said nothing more to him. The two men got back in the car, followed by the servants, and returned to De Xiaofeng's house. Li Mubai stayed for dinner, then returned to his hostel.

The next day, Li Mubai sold his horse to the innkeeper and moved to Faming Temple. Since he had nothing special to do, he practiced his sword in the courtyard. He gradually regained a certain spirit, which changed him from the carelessness of recent times.

After a few days, he went to his friend De Xiaofeng's place. His wound was already much better because he had called a doctor and had spent a good sum to get a precious ointment. The two men chatted at leisure in the reception hall. De Xiaofeng suddenly said:

"Brother, guess a little? As expected, the incident with Feng Long, the Little Lance, happened to the ears of Huang Jibei, the Lean Buddha Amida. Yesterday he sent me a certain lord Liu Qi to tell me he wants to meet you!"

"There is no problem, I wait!"

"What are you waiting for?" De Xiaofeng sighed in despair, "he just wants to meet you. This man is really very powerful, you must not offend him!"

"What power could a merchant like him have?"

"How so? Do you think merchants can't have power? I'll tell you, in Qianmen, Gros Lu San has opened six very famous private banks. Even the princes or the beiles must greet him with a smile. As for the richest person in the northeast of the city, it is precisely Huang Jibei. I would like to know which administration does not owe him

a few thousand Hong of money."

"So for you," replied Li Mubai coldly, "whoever has money has power and fame?"

"But of course, in the capital we do not look at the one who has big arms or a good placement of legs, we only talk about those who have the most money! Even though you are superior to Huang Jibei in martial arts, he has a lot more money than you and can spend it to counter you!"

Obviously, these words shocked Li Mubai. De Xiaofeng tried to persuade him again tactfully.

"Recently, you have already offended Wei Fengxiang and Feng Long, two great tyrants of Rivers and Lakes. They are not going to give up the game, expect to meet them again one day on your way. Now, Huang Jibei wants to meet you, and I don't know what is happening with Qiu Guangchao, the General with the Silver Spear. Four men, that's already a lot! We really need to discuss together how to deal with them. Next month, I have to go to Dongling on a mission. You will find yourself alone here and you should try not to go out too much. You don't know if someone is plotting against you, which is why I urge you to refrain for a while from showing your talents too much. Wait till I come back, it will take me a month at the most, and we'll try to find a way. Either friends will want to mediate for us, or we will just fight; we will see what is preferable!"

De Xiaofeng was talking endlessly, which was starting to annoy Li Mubai. He nodded mechanically and managed to get him to change the subject. They discussed until the evening, Li Mubai stayed to eat at his friend's house and then took leave when the lamps were turned on.

## Chapter 12

*On a rainy night, the courtesan asks him to stay,*

*He sleeps soundly on the pillow;*

*In the small temple, he determines the Buddha's kung fu*

*And the terrace of his fists.*

Li Mubai walked out west of the alley where his friend lived and walked south along the avenue. The weather was threatening. Big black clouds hid the stars and a distant rolling thunder was heard. Passers-by and carts hurried to avoid the rain. Li Mubai hired a vehicle to travel south of the city to Hanjatan.

He stopped in front of the House of Sumptuous Treasures. Under the downpours, Li Mubai hurried inside. A young servant announced it as soon as he entered and he went upstairs. Only Xianniang's bedroom was dimly lit. As he approached, Li Mubai intentionally echoed his footsteps. Outside the door, he recognized the voices of the young woman and her mother talking.

"Xianniang!" he called through the curtain.

"Who is it?" hastened to ask Lady Xie.

"Perhaps it is Lord Li!" Said the young woman.

Dame Xie raised the lamp and went to the small living room. Li Mubai was entering it at this time.

"It is indeed Lord Li who is here!" Lady Xie exclaimed welcoming him.

Li Mubai smiles. Not seeing Xianniang arrive, he entered the room. She was sitting on the edge of the bed and did not get up when he entered, revealing a resentful face. She observed Li Mubai out of the corner of her eye and said:

"Lord Li, are you coming to see me again? I thought you had found a civil servant job in the provinces!"

"Civil servant in the provinces?" he smiles. "I will never be a civil servant in this life!"

Li Mubai sat down on a square stool and Lady Xie poured him a glass of tea.

The whispering of the rain could be heard through the window; it was raining heavily and the thunder had been rumbling for quite a while. Li Mubai smiles at Xianniang and says:

"Don't blame me! I've been really, really busy lately. First I moved, and then Lord De needed me for a little business!"

Li Mubai watched Xianniang, who let out a small smile. He continued:

"It's been three days since I came to see you, it's as if three months have passed! I was very sorry. Today, despite the rain, I found the time to come."

Xianniang smiled gracefully at him and, in a passionate rush, exclaimed:

"You found the time to come today, but are you only going to stay a bit?"

"I have nothing more to do now. I have already moved and settled this matter for my friend. From now on, I will be able to come every day."

Saying this, Li Mubai knew he was exaggerating. Who could afford to come every day? Xianniang was happy to hear these words but exclaimed with a laugh:

"You will come every day, I can't believe you! In any case, it's raining and there are no customers today, stay a little!"

"It's okay," agreed Li Mubai. "I won't be leaving until around midnight."

"Are you not afraid that your wife will ask questions?"

Li Mubai couldn't help but blush.

"Haven't I told you already?" he smiles. "I am over twenty years old but I am not married. I came to the capital alone. Recently, I was still staying at the hostel, now I have a room in a temple in Prime Minister's Lane."

Xianniang did not remember that he was still single and looked surprised.

"Lord Li, why aren't you married?" She asked him. It was the only story that had broken his heart, if it was revived, the pain would return, intact. Now it was Xie Xianniang who questioned him, she who had already caught him in her nets. Li Mubai suddenly felt immense pain go through him. He endured this pain for a moment then hit his knee and said with a sigh:

"I don't want to talk about it, it hurts too much!"

Xianniang was paralyzed for a moment. Li Mubai was afraid she might have misconceptions. Dame Xie slipped out of the bedroom and he sighed again for a long time.

"What I'm going to tell you, I can only tell you, even my friends don't know. Since I was little, I have in mind to marry a very beautiful and talented woman. My relatives introduced me to many young girls, but I didn't like any of them. Then I met a young girl named Yu who is extremely beautiful and skilled in martial arts. She held me in great esteem. Her father liked me a lot too."

Xianniang was engrossed in his story and allowed herself a remark:

"Didn't you hire a matchmaker for the wedding, which seemed very possible?"

Li Mubai smiled bitterly:

"No, it was impossible! As a child, this young girl was engaged to someone else!"

Xianniang changed her expression and looked intently at Li Mubai, who was holding his head, leaning on the table, extremely melancholy. She found this young man so honest and so sensitive was really to be pitied and she was very affected by his lot; tears even beaded in her eyes. Li Mubai was beset by a thousand feelings, he wanted to tell Xianniang that besides Yu Xiulian he found another young woman absolutely lovely and that was her, and that later he really hoped that he could find a way to marry her. He preferred to marry a lovely courtesan gifted with great sensitivity rather than a vulgar and uneducated young country girl. Li Mubai, however, avoided enlightening her on this point. They found themselves face to face, without saying anything.

The storm was rumbling outside. From the ground floor rose music and the song of a woman. The air was sweet and tragic, like the songs of wild geese in a storm. Xianniang began to cry sadly. She wiped her tears with her handkerchief as she thought about what he had just said to her. She wanted to speak but her mother then came back into the room, a red ticket in her hand. Li Mubai suspected his provenance and knew who was asking Xianniang to join him. Facing the severe thunderstorm and looking at the lovely Xianniang so distressed, Li Mubai was truly upset.

Word in hand, Lady Xie said to her daughter:

"Lord Lu San has sent a cart to pick you up to drive you to his home because His Excellency Xu is waiting for you there."

Xianniang frowned.

"It's raining heavily and they ask me to move! Mom, tell them I'm sick and can't go!"

"What? Lord Xu has always spent a lot of money to see you! If you don't make it, don't you risk offending him? Besides, if he finds out that you are sick, he will certainly be worried and send Lord Lu San to visit you."

Xianniang huffed a little and straightened up.

"Lord Li," she said, "wait here for me, I'll be back in a moment."

Li Mubai nodded. Lady Xie was naturally not excited to see the young man stay. She finally told herself that it was a regular customer who had offered them several pieces of satin. She didn't want to offend him and said:

"Lord Li, don't go! Lie down on the bed if you want to rest."

"I'm not tired," replied Li Mubai.

In front of the mirror, Xianniang arranged her hair and then followed her mother downstairs.

Li Mubai found himself alone in front of the lamp, melancholy. The sound of rain and thunder grieved him to the utmost. He thought again that he shouldn't come here so often and that a man worthy of the name should be able not to give in. He didn't understand why, but he found it hard to abandon Xianniang, this tender young woman, with a pretty face and adorable manners. He didn't realize that these were the same feelings he had previously felt for Xiulian, and that the curse was coming back to hit him full force.

Like last time, he was completely exhausted, without envy, not knowing what the future held in store for him. I have been here several times, he thought. This Lord Xu sent her a note almost every time. It must be Xu, the assistant minister De Xiaofeng told me about. Because he is a high official, he must be afraid of being followed by the Imperial Censor and would rather ask Xianniang to come. Only, what is Lord Lu San doing in the midst of all this? Is it possible that it is Gros Lu San which runs several private banks in the south of the city? If Xianniang is seeing these two honorable and wealthy people, why would she maintain such a loving friendship with me?"

Li Mubai was deep in thought. After a while he felt weary and went to lie on the bed. Spontaneously, he pulled the pillow towards him. It was a Suzhou lacquered wood summer pillow that was a little over a chi long. Li Mubai found it very heavy, which surprised him somewhat. So he examined it. It was hollow and looked like some kind of box. Li Mubai saw that it was not locked. Driven by curiosity, he opened it and was stunned. The holster did not contain any hairpin or other jewelry, but a shiny dagger over eight inches

long. Li Mubai immediately closed the lid and quickly put the box back to where he had found it. Xianniang is a courtesan, he thought in astonishment, why would she hide a dagger in her pillow? Could it be possible that she really is some kind of knight? Li Mubai thought for a moment and found Xianniang's attitude very suspicious. She must have had a tragic story to end up like a courtesan. "Maybe it's because she knows my bravery that she has this inextricable affection for me, in the hope of settling an unfortunate affair?"

The rain gradually stopped, Li Mubai seemed more and more concerned. The light from the lamp flickered over the red curtain and the purple blanket, enveloping the room in mystery. The singing on the ground floor had long ceased and silence reigned throughout the house.

A noise then echoed in the hallway. Li Mubai lay down with his head on the pillow, and pretended to be sound asleep. He heard the curtain open and footsteps in the small living room. It was indeed Xianniang returning.

"Lord Li fell asleep!" She said, approaching the bed to cover it with a blanket she had just unfolded.

Li Mubai rubbed his eyes and slowly sat up.

"I lay down for a while and must have dozed off," he says.

"If you still want to rest, stay lying down!" Xianniang exclaimed.

Dame Xie handed him a glass of tea. He took a sip and said with a smile:

"It's getting late, I'm going home!"

Li Mubai shook his clothes and got ready to leave. Xianniang held it back with one hand. Her face flushed somewhat and you could see a deep tenderness in her eyes; she then said to him, between jest and despair:

"It's still raining, it's too difficult to move around at the moment! Will you still have the nerve to go home now?"



At this question, Li Mubai blushed and Xianniang forced him to sit down.

"Whatever happens tonight," she said laughing and frowning, "I forbid you to go!"

Li Mubai, like drunk, laughed and looked at Xianniang. The whispering of the rain did not cease throughout the night. In the early morning it was still raining. Li Mubai called a cart and drove back to Faming Temple.

After that night, the attachment between Xianniang and Li Mubai grew stronger and stronger. Li Mubai questioned her several times about her life but she never went into details and it always ended in sobs. People who have known a tragic story dread sharing their secrets, and Li Mubai later avoided asking her about it.

He came to see her every day. Xianniang knew that he had not found a job and therefore had little money set aside. She advised him to come less often. Li Mubai complied with her wish, so they only saw each other once every two days. Li Mubai still had plans to marry her; only, he had no news of his uncle and the promises of a possible employment had no result. He could always count on his friend to provide for his needs and continue his idle life. During a day spent with his friend De Xiaofeng, he said:

"Big brother, you know a lot of people in Beijing, couldn't you ask someone to find me a place where I can teach boxing?"

"Teaching boxing and martial arts is far too precarious a profession," De Xiaofeng disapproved. "You will not earn your living in Jianghu. With your skills, why would you do this? Especially now that we are friends, I would have no dignity in letting you do this labor of misery. Don't worry, you can count on me to provide you with one hundred to two hundred liang a month, if you need more, tell me. You're not going to do anything yet, and when I get back from Dongling, we'll find a solution. If you want to earn some money, maybe we could open an escort agency. It's still a lot better than those stifling little jobs you can think of!"

After this speech, Li Mubai could no longer force his friend to find

him a job.

Several days passed, De Xiaofeng sent Fuzi to pick up his friend to come to his house.

"I'm leaving tomorrow for Dongling," he told him. "I am traveling with several people from the inner courtyard. No need for you to accompany me to the city gates. I have at least 20 days and I will be back in two months at the latest. I will definitely be back before the Mid-Autumn Festival anyway. Friend, you really must stay here and wait for me; you will also take good care of my family. One more thing or two, we have already offended the Five Feng Tigers of Shen Prefecture. One day or another, Feng Mao, the Golden Sabers, will certainly come and take revenge. I'll tell you the truth, with your mastery of martial arts, you can beat him; only he knows many people in Jianghu and you cannot imagine what he is capable of. We must remain vigilant and not offend him further. If he comes to find you, put the blame on me and tell him to wait until I come back, we will advise later."

"Regarding Xianniang, if you really want to marry her, I really approve of you. But you have to think carefully, because marrying a prostitute makes the husband untrustworthy in the eyes of others. I heard that Assistant Minister Xu wanted to marry her, and also that Fat Lu San had plans on her. Of course, these are just rumors, but you still have to be careful and discreet. These two men are very rich and influential, we must not offend them!"

Li Mubai was angry and disapproved of his friend's words. He didn't want to argue with him though and answered vaguely, knowing that as soon as he left he would do whatever he wanted. Li Mubai dined at his friend's house. De Xiaofeng handed him a deposit book from a private bank and told him to dispose of the money in the account as he liked, then Li Mubai took his leave. The next day he returned to his friend's house. At the entrance, the servants told him that he had left very early in the morning. Li Mubai then explained to them:

"If people show up and want to get you into trouble, don't hesitate to come and get me!"

"Before leaving," they replied, "our master carefully recommended that we address Lord Li if anything happens!"

Li Mubai, reassured, returned to the temple.

After De Xiaofeng left, Li Mubai found himself without any friends in such a big city. When he felt lonely, he would go and chat with Xianniang. Li Mubai, who wanted to know more about Lord Xu and Fat Lu San, once questioned Xianniang. According to him, Xu the assistant minister was a regular customer and Lord Lu San was one of his friends. Since the assistant minister was a high-ranking official, it was difficult for him to go to the pleasure district. So he appealed to Lord Lu San to go get her or send her a note. They met most of the time in a restaurant, but especially at the residence of the concubine of Gros Lu San. Lord Xu was now over sixty years old, he was very rich and was familiar with a prince,

Li Mubai then mentioned the rumors about her marriage to Lord Xu. Xianniang blushed, somewhat ashamed, and replied:

"I absolutely don't want to marry him. Lord Xu already has two concubines, that is enough for him. It is Fat Lu San who needs me to show himself well to Lord Xu."

A relentless hatred towards Fat Lu San mounted in Li Mubai. If I ever meet him, he thought, I'll knock him out!

De Xiaofeng had been gone for five days already. We were entering the third ten days of the heatwave season. It was extremely hot and stuffy. Li Mubai's small room looked like a steam room. He had thus spread a mat in the coolest part of the courtyard. He was lying there and tirelessly waved his fan. In the courtyard there were only two small temples dedicated to ancient gods of Buddhism, and two outer galleries where two tombs stood; even the monks rarely visited this part of the temple. Li Mubai observed the sky and watched the white clouds pass by. He was dozing off when rushed footsteps sounded. Three individuals tumbled into the courtyard.

At first glance, Li Mubai was most struck by the man in his thirties, who wore a long robe of white ramie fabric and waved a round fan. He was not very tall, his face tanned and rather thin, the expressive

eyes and the imposing air. Li Mubai recognized him immediately. He had in front of him the oh so famous Huang Jibei, the Lean Buddha Amida, whom he had once met in Erzha with his friend De Xiaofeng. Li Mubai didn't seem surprised. He straightened up and asked, while buttoning his coat:

"Who are you looking for?"

Huang Jibei was accompanied by two servants, he stepped forward with a smile on his face and put his fist in his other hand.

"Do I have the honor to speak to Lord Li Mubai?"

Li Mubai knew he was coming for him, so why be surprised? He greeted him with folded hands and said:

"Himself!"

Huang Jibei continued to greet him.

"Nice to meet you," he said, observing the young man intently. "My name is Jin Langzhai."

Li Mubai laughed inwardly as he saw that he didn't want to reveal his true identity and listened to what he had to say to him.

"I'm pretty good at martial arts and several famous Jianghu heroes respect me for it. Recently, I heard that you have befriended Lord De Xiaofeng. Lord De proclaims himself the first hero of the capital and thus insults Your Excellency. I heard that in Shahe Wei village you beat Fengxiang, the one who surpasses Lü Bu, and that in the lowlands in the south of the city you wounded Feng Long, the Little Lance. You would also have threatened Huang Jibei, the Lean Buddha Amida, Qiu Guangchao, the General with the Silver Spear, as well as Feng Mao, the "Golden Sabers", is that right?"

Huang Jibei had a small smile on his face as he asked him all this, but kept a very dignified demeanor. Li Mubai knew full well that he harbored bad intentions. The young man raised his head, raised his chest and exclaimed:

"That's right! That's what I said. It is mainly this Huang Jibei, the

others I do not care; but he, with his position and his advantages, he thinks he's a tyrant, I really can't stand him. I wait a few days for it to be less hot and I'll go tell him what I think. I must measure myself against him!"

Huang Jibei's face had turned purple.

"His Excellency won't need to go find him. Huang Jibei is a valiant knight and an honest man. In addition, he has no desire to duel against people of no fame in Jianghu. I'm a friend of his, if anyone looks down on him, I can't let this affront go. Only you are related to De Xiaofeng and I will have to consider you as a friend as well. If I came here today, it is to learn a little about you. I'll tell you, let's both fight and if you win, then Huang Jibei can only estimate you afterwards."

Li Mubai smiled coldly. He's pretty smart, he thought. He comes to challenge me and introduces himself under another name. Note, so much the better, I won't have to hold my fists, and we'll see what happens when I crush him!"

Li Mubai exclaimed:

"Very happy that you keep me company!"

Huang Jibei took off his long robe and found himself in cream-colored silk pants and jacket. He entrusted his clothes and his fan to his servants and rolled up the sleeves of his jacket. He took a few steps forward and got into a fighting stance. He stared at Li Mubai and said:

"Brother Li, honor you!"

Li Mubai knew that Huang Jibei would definitely use kung fu. He stepped forward, rolling up his sleeves and conscientiously attacking with a punch. He now had to determine what style of boxing Huang Jibei practiced. He dodged the blow and moved to the right. Attacking from the side, he tried to push Li Mubai with both hands. Li Mubai anticipated the attack and quickly recognized the bagua boxing (98). He blocked Huang Jibei and jumped away behind his back. Huang Jibei turned around immediately, but Li

Mubai was already giving him a powerful blow to the chest. Huang Jibei blocked Li Mubai's wrist in time and thus retained it at chest level.

Huang Jibei had a lot of strength and had no trouble firmly holding Li Mubai's wrist. Even bending his legs, Li Mubai could not break free; he absolutely couldn't move. Huang Jibei suddenly raised his right leg to strike Li Mubai in the lower abdomen. He immediately jumped up, allowing him to free his trapped hand, and took advantage of his momentum to punch Huang Jibei full in the chest. A thud was heard and a person with a strong accent from Shanxi exclaimed:

"Nice shot!"

Huang Jibei was reeling. The blow had struck him completely and the two servants came running to support him. He was as white as a sheet. He turned his flickering head to see who was this person who had cheered his opponent. The man was not very tall, but quite round, and had a chubby face. He was wearing a white jacket and grease-stained apron. He resembled the cook of a small boui-boui. No one could have said when he arrived in the courtyard of the monastery to witness the fight. Li Mubai smiled proudly and exclaimed:

"Friend, do you admit defeat?"

"I lost," Huang Jibei growled, resentfully. "But the Lean Buddha Amida, Huang the Fourth Lord will not stop there and will sooner or later come to find you!"

Li Mubai laughed.

"Huang Jibei," he said to him, "you are really going too far! Do you really think I didn't recognize you?"

Huang Jibei, seeing that Li Mubai had discovered his identity, did not know where to stand. He exhaled deep sighs as he left the temple, supported by his servants. The fat man in the apron approached Li Mubai with a thumbs up.

"Lord Li," he said to him, "I really admire you! A few days ago, you injured Feng Long, the Little Lance; today you are crushing Huang Jibei, the Lean Buddha Amida. When it comes to kung fu, you should be number one in all of Beijing!"

Li Mubai hinted at a small smile of pride.

"I do not care! Even if there were really talented men in Beijing, I wouldn't dare to brag! People like Huang Jibei enjoy unjustified fame and believe themselves to be invincible on this earth. I absolutely have to crush them all one by one!"

Showing the mat unfolded on the floor, Li Mubai continued:

"Please, boss, sit down and let's take the time to chat a bit!"

## Chapter 13

*It's hard to hold back jealousy and anger,*

*Again he waves his iron fists;*

*The sadness caused by his departure*

*Shed pearls of tears.*

The portly man in the apron was the owner of a small tavern north of the alley where the temple was located. His strong accent from southern Shanxi made one think he hadn't been in the capital for long. He had opened this shop which he ran with an employee. Li Mubai often went there to drink, and sometimes to have his meal having bought some sesame cakes in passing.

The boss was generally not talkative. After the fight between Li Mubai and Feng Long in the lowlands in the south of the city, a fight which he knew about somehow, he was particularly respectful towards Li Mubai and talked with him more often.

"In a cart passing in front of the tavern, I saw the Skinny Buddha Amida," the boss told him. "I immediately thought he was coming to visit Lord Li for a duel. I didn't even take off my apron and immediately came back here. I figured that Skinny Buddha Amida was a famous person in the capital, and if you both got into a fight, he was going to hurt you. Ha ha! I never thought you would settle his score so quickly! Lord Li, you are surprising, with which great teacher did you study?"

"I have never had a teacher, but I have practiced a little in the countryside in recent years. Tell me, boss, we both chat a lot, but I've never asked you for your honorable name!"

"It's too much honor! My name is Shi, I had a first name but it's been a long time since nobody uses it and I myself forgot it. People usually call me Shi the Great or Shi the Fat."

"Boss Shi, I suppose you are defending yourself well?"



Shi the Fat was surprised:

"Is that... what do you mean? The business is quite good, the customers are numerous. We especially win a lot with alcohol, a little less with the dishes. There are only two of us and in the restaurant business we always earn a little money."

"I'm not talking about your business," replied Li Mubai, laughing, "but your feats of arms or boxing, you must know yourself well, what is your specialty?"

"Lord Li does me too much honor! I am rather stout, if I walk a little too fast I cannot move afterwards. How could I wield a saber or be a boxer? On the other hand, it's true that I admire people who have this talent. I always enjoy seeing the acrobats perform their performances during the few traveling martial arts shows."

"Where do you know Skinny Buddha Amida?"

"It's been almost two years that I am in Beijing, replied Shi the Fat, how could I not know him? Lord Li, you yourself must have heard of the two wealthy lords of the capital, Huang the fourth lord from the east of the city and the Gros Lu San from the south. Gros Lu San has already opened many private banks and knows many very wealthy people, but he does not enjoy the immense fame of Huang the Fourth Lord. With the prestige that Lord Huang has in his mastery of martial arts and thanks to his numerous donations for the restoration of temples in particular, Gros Lu San will never be able to match him."

Hearing Fat Shi move from Huang Jibei to Fat Lu San, Li Mubai felt stung. Today, he thought, I beat Huang Jibei, sooner or later I must also correct this Fat Lu San. Because they are rich and powerful, everyone finds them extraordinary. He finally said:

"These two men, by the power that their wealth gives them, must certainly believe they are allowed anything!"

"Absolutely! Huang Jibei still remains more or less correct, he sometimes abuses his power but still knows what friendship means and performs benevolent acts. Fat Lu San is really capable of

anything, if someone offends him all he has to do is open his mouth so that he is immediately thrown into prison. He has knowledge in all the offices of the imperial censors. In Hanjiatan alley and at the stone hutong, all the girls hate him but none dare say it out loud. Currently, even officers or wealthy people who want to marry a prostitute have to go through him. If Fat Lu San knows the young woman, the future husband must pay her a large sum of money; suddenly they all abandon their project."

Listening to him talk about Fat Lu San like that, he seemed like a real despot. Li Mubai was very surprised and found it hard to believe it. Shi the Fat continued:

"Today you defeated Skinny Buddha Amida, you must remain vigilant because you can be sure that he will find a way of revenge!"

"I'm not afraid of him or that Lu San!" Li Mubai exclaimed. "I am alone here, at worst, they can only prevent me from settling in Beijing. But when I leave, I will have to achieve something extraordinary for them to understand what I am capable of."

A monk entered the courtyard as Li Mubai finished his sentence. Shi the Fat immediately straightened up and said:

"Until next time, Lord Li!"

"I'm not taking you home," Li Mubai told him, getting up too, "see you soon!"

After Shi the Fat had left, the monk respectfully bowed with folded hands to Li Mubai and inquired:

"I heard that the venerable merchant Huang Jibei has just visited you. Huang Jibei has always been a benevolent man; recently, thanks to him, the monastery of Daci and the small temple of Chaoyin could be restored. Lord Li, since you know him, could you not tell him about a possible donation for the restoration of our monastery? To begin with, a few hundred liang of silver would suffice, we will find the rest elsewhere."

The monk then designated the main temple of the monastery, and

showed Li Mubai the places to restore and the parts to repaint. He sincerely implored the young man to tell Huang Jibei about it.

Li Mubai smiled deep inside. "I just humiliated Huang Jibei, he thought, and they are asking me to ask him to make a donation to their monastery, it's really funny!"

Li Mubai obviously did not mention the incident with Huang Jibei and replied rather vaguely to the monk.

"Well," he said to him, "I'll see when to talk to him about it. Today was our first meeting and I will not be able to present your request to him right away."

The monk insisted again then withdrew.

Li Mubai, sitting alone on the mat, could not stop sighing. Life is really not what it used to be, he thought. I would never have believed that the monks also began to lick the boots of wealthy people! Huang Jibei and Fat Lu San are not only vulgar men, but they have no talent at all. They do not have a nobility title or the status of high officials; just because they are extremely rich, they end up with as much power as a prince or a marquis. Despite my abilities, I can't even get a little scribe job. I would be unable to support myself if I could not rely on my friend De Xiaofeng."

Discontent and resentment suddenly sprang up in him. He jumped up and retrieved his precious sword from the bedroom. Li Mubai then began to perform a sword dance in the courtyard. He was sweating and raising his blade, shimmering, his gaze fixed on the edge which seemed covered with a thin layer of frost. Li Mubai was full of pity and compassion for himself. He sighed deeply. Eventually he threw his sword on the mat and paced back and forth under the shadow of the west wing building. He was both preoccupied and revolted, and he wished he had found a place to be able to vent his feelings.

As night fell, the setting gold filled the sky, and the purple clouds, floating in small groups, seemed to represent the sadness of Li Mubai but also recalled the delicate cheeks of the beautiful Xianniang. Li Mubai replaced his sword in his room, put on his long

robe, and went out to go to Boss Shi's tavern. This consisted of only two tables and four benches. Eight to nine people were already seated, drinking and chatting. Li Mubai, seeing the tavern full, turned around. Shi the Fat, his torso clad in his one apron, then called Li Mubai.

"Lord Li, come in, I'll find a place for you!"

"If there isn't, I'll come back in a moment."

"No, there is! Come come!" repeated the boss Shi several times, offering him a small stool behind the counter. "Will it suit you here?"

"Sitting here, I feel like the owner of the tavern!"

"If Lord Li becomes our boss," he replied laughing, "we will have to change the tavern into a great restaurant!"

When Fat Shi laughed, all of his fat vibrated. The customers of the tavern had their eyes riveted on Li Mubai. Some, who seemed to recognize him, whispered in their ears we do not know what remarks. The boss Shi was very caring for his distinguished guest, he personally took care of ridding Li Mubai of his overcoat and offered him a fan. He served him food and alcohol himself. Li Mubai started to feel embarrassed and said:

"Boss Shi, don't bother about me! In a moment, you will send your employee to the shop next door to order me some onion pancakes, for half a jin (99), and that will suit me very well!"

In the stuffy little tavern, Li Mubai was fanning himself while sipping his drink. He had already drunk a jug of alcohol and was starting to get slightly dizzy. For fear of finding himself drunk again, he stopped drinking. Soon after, a few customers left the stall and the less busy Shi was able to come and chat with him. They had already brought him the onion pancakes. Li Mubai would cut them with one hand while eating the dishes prepared by Shi. The boss came and sat down at the counter; drops of sweat, the size of soybeans, beaded on his face. He was tapping the handle of his palm leaf fan and seemed to have something important to say to him:

"Does Lord Li know about this? The fabric merchant of the Precious Virtue shop in the Caishikou district committed suicide by swallowing a pellet of opium!"

Li Mubai knew the store, it was not far from there.

"I know where the store is, the business was not bad!"

"The business was going well, but it was not enough," explained Shi the Fat. "The money earned did not meet the debts he owed. Two years ago, he had his storefront redone and brought in a large stock of fabrics. He must have borrowed several thousand liang of silver from the banks, and all those he had borrowed belong to Gros Lu San." Hearing Lu San's name, Li Mubai became more attentive. Shi the Fat continued:

"I've heard that interest is very important. Adding them to the amount borrowed, he owed nearly ten thousand liang. In recent days, Gros Lu San has urged the boss of the fabric store to return the money. The shop managed to repay the interest, but Gros Lu San was not satisfied and wanted the full amount immediately. The boss collected half of the money again, but the Gros Lu San still did not accept and said he was going to talk to the yamen about it; that he was going to close his shop and put him in jail. The boss, though angry, was terrified. As usual, he went to bed after eating; we do not know when he swallowed the opium and succumbed!"

Shi the Fat was only informing Li Mubai of this news that was circulating, but it plunged the young man into a great fury. Li Mubai took another sip of alcohol and exclaimed:

"So this is how Fat Lu San amassed his fortune! Good! Sooner or later he will have to be held to account!"

Two customers entered at this moment in the tavern and the boss Shi hastened to go to serve them.

Li Mubai was sated. He paid the bill and left. Under the faint moon and the many stars, he began to stroll. He felt both sad and upset. He was a little tipsy and did not want to go back to the temple, he preferred to go to Xianniang to chat a little. As he thought of the

young woman, emotion swept over him and he felt overwhelmed with sadness.

Li Mubai strolled casually through the streets and arrived at Hanjiatan district, in front of the entrance to the House of Sumptuous Treasures. By the light of the lanterns, many customers were entering and exiting and several teams were parked in front. Xianniang probably has other clients, he thought, but whatever, I have to see her! Li Mubai went in and a young man walked up to meet him, smiling.

"Welcome, Lord Li! The young Cuixian receives a client at the moment!"

"Who is it?" Li Mubai asked.

"Lord Lu San is up there, he won't stay very long. Enjoy another room in the meantime!"

"It will not be worth it, I am on good terms with Lord Lu San and I will go up to see him!"

"Please," smiled the young boy, "you can go up!"

And he announced:

"A client for the young lady Cuixian!"

Li Mubai went upstairs. Lady Xie walked out as he reached the front of the room. Her aged, thin face wore a forced smile. As if worried that someone might hear her from inside the room, she addressed Li Mubai in a low voice:

"Lord Li, come back in a moment! Lord Lu San is here!"

Faced with this attitude, Li Mubai took offense and his face flushed with anger. He was about to answer her when the coarse laughter of a man echoed in the room, followed by the delicate one of the young woman. Li Mubai, piqued with anger and jealousy, raised his voice, addressing Lady Xie:

"What? Gros Lu San is here! What can he do to me! He doesn't scare

me! Go get Xianniang, I must say two words to her, then I will go!"

The uproar that Li Mubai was orchestrating frightened Lady Xie terribly. She hastened to stamp several times and said:

"Lord Li, speak less loudly!"

The laughter in the room had suddenly stopped. The curtain was raised and a stout, tall man appeared. The hallway lights made it possible to detail it. He was over forty years old. He didn't have a mustache or a beard, but small eyes and a big mouth, prominent cheeks even bigger than his nose. He was wearing a ramie cloth top and an unlined dress made from two different pieces of silk. He really looked like a powerful person. He stared at Li Mubai and questioned him with a grimace:

"What do you want?!"

Li Mubai knew he was dealing with Fat Lu San and his fists were itching. Li Mubai immediately curbed his anger and puffed out his chest.

"My name is Li Mubai," he said. "I am a regular customer of Xianniang!"

"Oh," exclaimed Fat Lu San arrogantly. "So you are Li Mubai. These last days, all the poor wretches and the poor ones talk about your exploits in the street, and I understand that you particularly like to seek quarrels. I'm asking you the question, did you just call me Fat Lu San?"

"That's right," exclaimed Li Mubai proudly, "and I know a lot about you, Fat Lu San; I know you want to buy Xianniang so you can lick the assistant minister Xu's boots, and I also know that you made the boss of Caishikou's fabric shop kill himself. It is for all these reasons that I come to find you, Gros Lu San, and correct you!"

Lu San had never looked down on anyone. He realized that Li Mubai was quite serious; he knew he had overcome Feng Long, the Little Lance. He, who was very fat and who had just eaten swallows' nests and shark fins as much as he wanted, was afraid of not

making the weight against the fists of the youngster. As the saying goes: "Great men are not afraid of small defeats. Not to mention that, with his position, he had no desire to risk his life against a lousy one. He bowed his fat and broad chin as he greeted Li Mubai with his hands clasped, and said:

"Well, you have guts, named Li. There, I don't have time to fight with you, but we'll talk about it next time!"

Fat Lu San spun around and was about to enter the room, when Li Mubai grabbed him from behind and held him back.

"Stay here!" He cried.

Li Mubai then pulled him so hard that he could only turn around. Completely frightened, Fat Lu San exclaimed, worried:

"But what do you want from me?"

Li Mubai raised his hand and punched him in the face with a "pa!" Resounding. Lu San's face was on fire. He stretched out his large hand to grab Li Mubai and exclaimed:

"Ah! You dare to hit me!"

Li Mubai then grabbed his wrist and twisted it and kicked it, causing him to fall to his knees on the planks on the floor. Li Mubai growled:

"Today Lord Li is going to crush you!"

Li Mubai gave him a hard heel kick behind the back of his neck again and Lu San sprawled on the floor screaming. Li Mubai hit him on the back again as Lu San continued to scream.

"But you're going to kill me!"

The young servants, maids and prostitutes from each room as well as clients rushed upstairs upon hearing the argument. Xianniang also burst in. She cried and began to grab hold of Li Mubai, begging him to stop:



"Lord Li! Don't beat him," she begged, "don't kill him!"

"I'm not going to kill him," Li Mubai growled. "But today, he must pay for all his crimes!"

The young man continued to give him violent blows in his fat thighs and his big butt. Lu San howled like a wolf.

Two customers came forward and tried to reason with Li Mubai, while servants helped Lu San to his feet. Seeing that many people had gathered, Lu San no longer feared Li Mubai and ordered the servants:

"Catch him and beat him! If you kill him, it doesn't matter! I will give each of you a hundred liang of silver!"

If the thrashing man had been someone else, with the promise of such a reward, all the fellows would have come running. Only there, everyone knew that besides being a friend of De Xiaofeng, Li Mubai was a formidable fighter. They preferred to reason with Lu San.

"It's okay, Lord Lu San, don't get upset! Lord Li is a decent person, if he behaved like this today it is because he is completely drunk. We will help you and take you back to your carriage; go home to rest. Tomorrow you will send a friend to mediate and settle this dispute. Lord Li is young, you have to be forgiving!"

Lu San's driver came upstairs. Lu San was supported to help him get down. Lu San growled again:

"Li, after what you did to me, I will never leave you alone! You can be sure that sooner or later you will learn who I am!"

These words gave Li Mubai a burst of blood, who was about to go downstairs and give him another beating, but the young Xianniang held him back by the arm.

"Don't beat him anymore," she said to him in tears, "don't make me lose face completely!"

"That's not enough for you!" Lady Xie exclaimed. "Lord Lu San is

very rich, we cannot afford to provoke him!"

"People can't provoke him", Li Mubai said with an icy smile, "but I, Lord Li, am happy to do it! He has money, I have my fists; we'll see which, my fist or his money, will be the hardest!"

Having said this, Li Mubai walked into the bedroom with Xianniang.

The girls and their clients who had witnessed the scene, the young servants who had intervened to reason with them, all had come downstairs and had returned to their rooms. Chatting in small groups, they thought that not only was Li Mubai good at martial arts, but he also certainly had power, because otherwise, how dare he go after Lord Lu San? Some said that, south of the city, Fat Lu San was richer than the God of Fortune and more terrifying than the God of the Underworld; who could have expected that today he would suffer such a great affront! But he certainly wouldn't give up and send someone to correct Li Mubai."

Lady Xie still looked scared. Her voice trembling, she advised Li Mubai:

"Lord Li, listen to me, you better go and hide!" It is certain that Lord Lu San will send his henchmen here. His henchmen are all ruthless bullies. We saw it very recently! In one of the brothels in Baishun Alley, a girl offended Lu San. He sent her his minions who put her in a very bad state and ransacked her entire room. They did not spare the client who was there and practically killed him. Finally, Lu San also tasked an acquaintance with throwing several people from the household into prison."

Li Mubai was furious.

"Don't worry," he told them. "He is unlikely to return here, because if he did return, everyone would know what happened! He will probably not do such a thing, he will prefer to mount a blow against me to send me to court or have me beaten in the middle of the street by his men; but anyway, I'm not afraid of him!" Li Mubai wore an expression of pride. He turned to Xianniang, sitting next to him. She kept crying and wiped her tears with a handkerchief. Li

Mubai said to her:

"You do not have to be afraid. No matter who he is, if he dares to come after you, I'll kill him. If you're afraid to stay here, you and your mother, just go with me. No matter where we go, I will never let you suffer."

Li Mubai's words were meant to comfort Xianniang, but the young woman unexpectedly began to sob even harder. He tried in vain to calm her down. Xianniang was inconsolable. Li Mubai was indignant. "Getting in such a mess for such a small matter," he thought. "Could it be possible that she could feel that I didn't have to hit him? Could it be that she is sad for him?"

Li Mubai was dumbfounded for a moment then glanced furtively at the young woman. Beside the lamp, she was still crying hot tears and looked really miserable. Her mother was also making a funeral face, one could understand that she was angry with Li Mubai because he had just offended one of their rich clients.

The thought made him angry and he wanted to clear it up with Xianniang, but he pulled himself together. "They're both downcast," he thought, "how could I still rush them with my questions?" Li Mubai thus exhaled long sighs. He left a note on the table, stamped his foot, and left the room. Usually, Xianniang would accompany him to the door and recommend that he come earlier the next day, then she would watch him leave the floor, leaning against the handrail, smiling and waiting for a little sign from Li Mubai. Today, she did not even accompany him to the entrance and sat there crying all the tears in her body. Only Lady Xie reacted and asked him in a small voice:

"Lord Li will surely come tomorrow?"

Li Mubai was even more pained and held back his anger. He made a small sound of approval and walked down the stairs.

On the ground floor, the servants, seeing Li Mubai leaving, became worried. They came forward and asked him courteously:

"Are you leaving, Lord Li?"

"If Fat Lu San sends you men," he replied bluntly, "tell them to go to Faming temple in the Prime Minister's hutong. Rest assured, if anything happens, I, Li Mubai, take full responsibility; I don't want to get you involved in this and get you in trouble!"

"Of course, of course," they answered confusedly. "We know it. May Lord Li also be reassured; Fat Lu San knows not to mess with you and won't dare to come and get you in trouble!"

Li Mubai nodded. Then he left the House of Sumptuous Treasures and returned to the temple. He was both angry and pained, and couldn't sleep. He reflected on the past two months and realized he had made a lot of mistakes. "With the bad luck that persists against me, how could I have created disorder in the pleasure district? Xianniang and I have been dating for a while and are now intimate; However, I have the impression of having lost all my fighting spirit by staying at her side. Besides Xie Xianniang is a famous courtesan, how many people like Lord Xu or Fat Lu San does she know? Because I am young, she was sincere and fell in love with me. If I ask her to marry me and follow me to lead a wandering life, who tells me that she will want to?" Li Mubai was completely dejected; he sighed until the middle of the night and ended up falling asleep.

The next day, Li Mubai thought back to the day before and realized that in one day he had beaten Huang Jibei, Skinny Buddha Amida, and Fat Lu San, the two most famous and powerful men in the capital. He felt extremely happy and satisfied. He told himself, however, that he had insulted them and he was sure they would not stop there. They would find a way to get revenge, so he had to stay vigilant. It was very hot that day. All day long, Li Mubai had only gone out to eat a bite at Shi the Fat. In the evening, he was extremely bored and could not resist the urge to go to Xianniang's place. Against all expectations, the behavior of the young woman was totally different from other times; she was cold and spirited, continually frowned and gave him no smile. Li Mubai stayed for a while, but he was starting to get bored. He then left the House of Sumptuous Treasures to finally return to the tavern.

Fat Shi was aware that Li Mubai had a fight with Fat Lu San at the brothel the day before. Li Mubai was very surprised and said:

"Boss Shi, you really have eyes and ears everywhere! The story with Fat Lu San was only last night, how come you already know? You work continuously and never go out, how can you know everything that is going on outside?"

"Lord Li," he said delighted, "you never see me leave my counter, but the people who inform me are so numerous!"

Li Mubai looked even more astonished.

"But after all, who is informing you of all this?"

"Lord Li is smart, how come you don't think about it? My tavern is small, of course, but I have a very good relationship with people and my customers are numerous. Some friends also come to see me for a drink; we are still chatting and chatting about everything. That you had fought, no one would have mentioned it and I probably would not have known; only it was Fat Lu San that you beat up. In recent years, he has allowed himself everything and will stop at nothing. Yesterday was the first time he had been corrected and that, if anyone knows it, everyone knows it! All the customers were excited to tell me about it and all gave a thumbs up when they talked about you!"

Boss Shi did the same towards Li Mubai, still smiling. A look of pride then appeared on the young man's face.

Shi the Fat continued:

"Lord Li, do you know that Fat Lu San is serving as an intermediary for a possible marriage between the courtesan Cuixian whom you frequent at the House of Sumptuous Treasures and Lord Xu, the former minister assisting at the Ministry of Ceremonies?"

Li Mubai hearing him mention this matter seemed unhappy.

"I have known for a long time that Fat Lu San uses Xianniang to lick Lord Xu's boots. But she personally told me that she didn't want to marry him. Lord Xu is old now, and apparently he already has two concubines to look after."

"I heard that the courtesan Cuixian was really not like the others!

Lord Li, you get along well with her, why don't you raise some money to marry her and ask her to stay by your side? It would be much better than spending your days alone at the monastery!"

"I'm not doing it", laughed Li Mubai, "how could I bind myself to a courtesan?"

"Lord Li, you are far too modest, with your abilities, it would be really easy to get rich. If you married her, she could have more peaceful days and you would spend less money."

Li Mubai was smiling but shaking his head no. He drank a few more glasses to drown his sorrow, then returned to the monastery.

The next day, the heat was stifling. On the horizon, the clouds were low, as if it was going to rain. Li Mubai had nothing to do and spent his time reading in his room. Towards mid-morning he suddenly heard someone calling from the court:

"Is Lord Li there?"

The voice was not unknown to him; Li Mubai hurried to go and see who asked. Right in the middle of the yard were buckets full of watermelons and Huang Jibei, the same who had been defeated two days earlier. He was accompanied by a servant and a person who had carried the watermelons on the pole. Huang Jibei was dressed elegantly. Very smiling, he respectfully greeted Li Mubai with folded hands.

"Mubai, my brother," he said to him, "I don't blame you for our skirmish the other day. I am here today to pay you a courtesy visit. I brought you some watermelons to cool you off in this heat!"

Li Mubai was amazed to see Huang Jibei suddenly behaving so respectfully and he felt embarrassed. With a confused smile, he greeted him too, a fist clenched in the other hand, and begged him to enter.

Huang Jibei took his place. He seemed delighted and exclaimed:

"Brother, I have known your fame for a long time and I would have liked to meet you sooner. You are constantly with De Xiaofeng. Our

two families have been on good terms for several generations and I guess he strongly advised you not to compete with me. I learned that he had gone on a mission; I jumped at the chance and immediately came to visit you under a false name. During our fight, I realized that your kung fu was a hundred times better than mine. I really admire you. Yesterday I heard that you corrected the rich and powerful Lu San from the south of town. I can only esteem you more and I have therefore decided to pay you a visit in all sincerity and to pay you my respects. Brother, if you will forget what happened between us shortly before, I would like to get to know you and that we become friends."

Li Mubai was a magnanimous person. Faced with these sincere words and the respect Huang Jibei showed him, he greeted him with folded hands. Li Mubai made him understand that he was showing him too many honors and assured him that he himself had been too impulsive the other day.

"If anyone was impulsive in this matter, it is me," Huang Jibei insisted. "I had never met you before and I appeared at the temple to fight against you. If people find out about this story, they are all going to laugh at me. But a duel was inevitable for us to get to know each other (100). If we see each other often, you will realize that I am really someone sincere; I sometimes have a sharp tongue, but I'm never ill-intentioned. De Xiaofeng knows it very well, ask him when he gets home."

"Brother Huang," replied Li Mubai, "I haven't been in Beijing for a long time, but I already knew your big name. I even met you once in the past, during a walk in Erzha with De Xiaofeng."

"Oh, that day in Erzha! So it was you who accompanied De Xiaofeng! I was in the company of friends and didn't have time to stop and chat with De Xiaofeng; otherwise, we could have gotten to know each other then!"

The two men spoke for a while, Huang Jibei questioned Li Mubai about his past and current occupations. The young man gave him a brief summary of his situation. Huang Jibei sympathized with him and reassured him. He shouldn't feel down if he couldn't achieve his ambitions just yet. They would wait for De Xiaofeng to come back

and together they would find a solution for their brother. They discussed this until noon. Huang Jibei wanted to invite Li Mubai to the restaurant for lunch; the young man declined the invitation, but assured him that he would come to visit him soon. Huang Jibei then took his leave and left accompanied by his servant.

Li Mubai walked him back to the temple entrance and watched him get into his personal cart, then returned to his room. As soon as he arrived in his room, the Buddhist monk introduced himself and exclaimed:

"Hey! Huang the fourth lord gave you beautiful watermelons!"

While speaking, the monk entered and asked him with a smile:

"He was there just now, did you slip him a word about what I asked you the other day?"

"I told him about it," Li Mubai replied calmly, "he will give me his answer in a few days."

"Lord Li, you are helping us enormously," cried the monk in the height of joy, "you have done a charitable act!"

"He brought me all these watermelons, continued Li Mubai, I will not be able to eat them on my own, take some, shifu (101)."

"Thank you, Lord Li!" Replied the monk, delighted, before leaving the room.

Li Mubai found himself alone in his room, melancholy. He found Huang Jibei seemingly sincere and kind, but he didn't know what intentions he had deep down, and didn't necessarily want to be close to him. Li Mubai took a nap. When he woke up, he decided to go for a walk to his uncle. He got dressed and headed for the "Half South" alley. Arriving in front of the house, Li Mubai knocked on the door; The servant Laisheng came quickly to open the door, greeted him respectfully and said:

"Lord Li, how come you haven't come in the last few days?"

"I had some business to take care of," Li Mubai replied, "and I



couldn't come."

Li Mubai wanted to enter but Laisheng, as if he wanted to block him, exclaimed:

"My master has gone out and has not yet returned, his wife is taking a nap!"

Li Mubai was taken aback. Usually, he thought, my uncle is always accompanied by his servant when he goes out. Could it be possible that he went out alone today? I'm sure my uncle has heard about my clashes with Huang Jibei and Fat Lu San, he's afraid it will get him in trouble and won't want to see me. Li Mubai scowled and said:

"Well, if it's like that, I'm going!"

The young man turned around, but Laisheng called him back:

"Lord Li, will you come back later?"

Li Mubai pretended not to hear him; Angry and deeply disappointed, he returned to the temple. It has been two months since I first came, he thought, I still haven't found a job. Now even my uncle doesn't want to see me anymore, so what am I still doing in Beijing? I'd better give the De family the bank book, pack my things, and go!"

Li Mubai made the decision to leave Beijing within a few days. In the evening, he went to Shi the Fat tavern. They chatted for a while and Li Mubai told him of his resolution.

"Staying too long in the capital can quickly become boring," Fat Shi told him. With your mastery of martial arts, you should go to the Jianghu and continue to build a reputation. Only, for now, your friend De Xiaofeng has left and asked you to look after his family. In my opinion, you should wait for him to come back, there will always be time to leave Beijing!"

"I can't wait for him," replied Li Mubai, "he went to Dongling on an official mission, who knows when he will return? In addition, at home, his wife and mother have several servants at their service.

They know how to hold their own and nothing can happen to them, and then they have many friends and acquaintances. Before I leave, of course, I have to sort out a number of things. De Xiaofeng gave me a passbook to withdraw money when needed. Tomorrow, I will take care of handing it over to his mother. Although I had a fight with Huang Jibei once, he visited me this morning and sincerely wants to become a friend. I will go to his house to bid him farewell. And then, I must also go to the House of Sumptuous Treasures to see Xianniang. Ever since I beat up on Fat Lu San, she's become distant, but as she has always taken good care of me, I must explain to her the reasons for my departure. Finally, I was also thinking of going to the Chunyuan agency to make it clear that it was I who hurt Feng Long and that it is against me that they should blame and not De Xiaofeng."

Shi the Fat, as if suddenly remembering something, hastened to say:

"I forgot to report you, Lord Li! Yesterday, I heard that the famous hero of Zhili Province, Feng Mao, the Golden Sabers, had left Shen Prefecture and was heading for Beijing!"

Li Mubai was stunned by this news and thought that if Feng Mao did indeed arrive in the capital, he should definitely not leave. Li Mubai finally said:

"If he comes, it's definitely to fight against me. If I learn that he is on his way and I leave the capital, it clearly shows that I fear him. I'm going to do it like this: I'm going to wait here three more days. If in three days he still hasn't arrived, I'll meet him!"

Shi the Fat thinks for a moment and says:

"If Feng Mao comes to Beijing to confront you, I'm sure Huang Jibei won't dare to help you. Feng Mao has held the entire Zhili province in his grip for several years, like Zhang Yujin, the Golden Spear, in Henan."

On behalf of Zhang Yujin, Li Mubai thought of old guard Yu and the He family, then inevitably thought of Yu Xiulian. He wondered what could have become of her. A wave of sadness suddenly seized him. Shi the Fat continued:

"If Feng Mao cares about his fame, I don't think he will lightly engage in a fight against someone who is good at martial arts. If he lost, the reputation he spent half his life forging would be totally destroyed!"

"Let him do what he wants," replied Li Mubai, "I am not afraid! All right, I'm going to take a look at the House of Sumptuous Treasures." Li Mubai left the tavern and went to Hanjiatan alley.

Arriving at the House of Sumptuous Treasure, he asked one of the servants if Fat Lu San had returned. The young boy, making sure that no one heard him, replied to Li Mubai with a smile:

"After the beating you gave him, he hasn't reappeared. He must be holed up at home!"

This made Li Mubai smile, who went straight upstairs; not hearing any customers at Xianniang's, he went back to the room. The young woman wore a light dress of pale pink color, she was alone, seated near the lamp. When Li Mubai entered, she nonchalantly straightened up and wanted to take off his overcoat. Li Mubai waved his hand away and took a seat in a chair. Xianniang served him a glass of tea. She looked worried; as if she still had an attachment to him, she remained standing beside him. Li Mubai took a sip of tea and said affably, "In a few days I will be leaving Beijing. I come today to say my goodbyes to you."

Xianniang was stunned. Tears sprang to her eyes, which clearly showed her feelings. Grabbing the young man's hand, she exclaimed:

"Where are you going? Will you come back?"

Li Mubai, as hypnotized by the tenderness she had for him, struggled desperately against his feelings and replied:

"I don't have a specific place to go and I don't think I'll be back for a while. In fact, I will probably not be returning to Beijing for several years."

Xianniang's delicate eyes grew redder and redder. Li Mubai said

reluctantly:

"I really have to go, I'm bored here. But before that, I had several things to tell you. You must know that I am not like the other customers who have no regard for the people who work in the brothels. They only look at them superficially, they come and go as they please, not seeing the girls as human beings; after being entertained, they abandon you without any regard. I'm not like that, I tell you sincerely, when I met you, I really appreciated and loved you. If I had had the money and if you had been okay with it, I would have got you out of this misery and we could have spent the rest of our lives as a married couple. But now that is no longer possible. Since I beat the Fat Lu San, I can see that you are cold with me!"

Tears flowed from Xianniang's eyes like fine pearls. She began to suffocate with sobs. She wanted to talk but nothing came out. Li Mubai sighed deeply and said:

"I know you're not like other girls, that's why I'm telling you all this. A prostitute can only have a sad past and a painful present. Whatever, now you have to think a little about your future. How many springs can a young girl live? What do Fat Lu San and Lord Xu know about feelings? You better find a sincere young man as soon as possible, no matter how rich or poor he is, as long as he respects you and treats you like a person."

Xianniang, hearing what Li Mubai had just said, began to cry even more. The young man continued:

"Whatever happens, you must not marry Fat Lu San, nor Lord Xu. Now that we know each other, I couldn't let you demean yourself, such an intelligent young woman, by these boors. If I ever learn that they used their power to force you to marry, I will come back to Beijing to kill them!"

Xianniang continued to cry and replied:

"Be quiet! I will never be able to marry Lord Xu! But when you say I'm cold with you, it's unfair." When she sobbed, her slender body began to shake, which also shook Li Mubai. Overcoming his feelings

and sadness, he exclaimed:

"Your attitude seemed distant to me! I know now that you have never stopped caring for me."

Li Mubai fully realized that he was reluctantly parting ways with her.

"I'll be leaving, but you can be sure I'll never forget you. If I can't find my way I will come back here earlier."

"I just want you to come back," Xianniang said vigorously, "whatever it is in three or five years, I will wait for you!"

Li Mubai remained pensive; he was moved, and his desire to leave seemed to dissipate. He finally said with a smile:

"You must not wait for me like this, but only hope that we can see each other again one day!"

"But in the end," she asked him, "wiping away her tears, why are you leaving? Where are you going? Couldn't you stay?"

Li Mubai, amazed, replied:

"Actually, I could stay, but living here doesn't suit me and I'm bored. I tell you the truth! I am a xiucan from Nangong, and I practice martial arts a bit. I have been in Beijing for two months and have already fought and defeated Wei Fengxiang, called The One Who Surpasses Lü Bu, Feng Long, known as the Little Lance, as well as Huang Jibei, the Lean Buddha Amida. These are the most famous brave men in the capital. Currently, Feng Mao, the Golden Sabers of Shen Prefecture also wants to compete against me, we'll see which of us wins. I am waiting for him in Beijing for three days, if he does not arrive by then, I will meet him by taking the road to Shen Prefecture. After our duel, I will go home for a while and I may also come back to Beijing."

Li Mubai clenched his fists and got excited as he gave all these explanations. Xianniang looked more upset. Lady Xie then appeared in the room, a red note in her hand, which she crumpled as she hurriedly put it in Xianniang's hands.

Li Mubai understood that this was a word from Fat Lu San and Lord Xu asking her to come. He didn't want to know more and said, straightening up:

"You have obligations, I'm going to go. We will see each other again one day!"

Xianniang suddenly put her hands on his shoulders and replied:

"Didn't you say you were leaving in three days? Won't you come back to see me tomorrow?"

"I'm not sure I can come back," said Li Mubai after thinking. "I still have several obligations towards my friends; I will not leave until I have completed them."

Lady Xie, who was watching them, asked:

"Are you leaving, Lord Li?"

"Yes," he nodded. "I am leaving from the capital, but I will come back."

He glanced at Xianniang, who was staring at him with beautiful eyes, deep in thought. She finally let her hands drop and said in a hollow voice:

"You just have to go!"

Li Mubai couldn't figure out what was on her mind. He thought, "I'm really in love with her, but can heroes afford to have weaknesses?" Li Mubai nodded slightly and walked out of the room without looking back. On the ground floor, a few servants called out to him:

"Are you leaving already, Lord Li?"

Li Mubai waved to them and left the House of Sumptuous Treasures. He headed west to return to the monastery. He had just taken a few steps, when suddenly someone grabbed him. Li Mubai jumped.

## Chapter 14

*Men lie in wait in the depths of the night,*

*Shi the Fat passes on the information;*

*The sabers whistle and the sword roars,*

*Feng Mao loses the Jianghu.*

Li Mubai, who had just been grabbed, turned around hastily. The man, with a burst of laughter, exclaimed:

"Lord Li, it's me!"

In the dim moonlight, Li Mubai recognized Shi the Fat.

"Boss Shi," he said to him, "but what are you doing here?"

"I was just looking for you!"

"What is going on?" Li Mubai asked, most astonished.

"Nothing serious, Lord Li, but your opponent is waiting for you at the Prime Minister's lane!"

"Who is that? Feng Mao, the Golden Sabers?"

"Exactly! He has already arrived in the capital. I just saw him. He is accompanied by two men and paces in the alley! I was afraid you wouldn't know about it and run into them unprepared, that's why I ran to warn you!"

Li Mubai was furious to learn that Feng Mao was waiting outside his house in the middle of the night and exclaimed:

"I'm finally going to meet him, let's see how he's going to stand up to me!"

Li Mubai walked away with a determined step, but Shi the Fat held him back.

"Lord Li," he told him, "I could see that they had swords and spears. You, you are unarmed, if they attack you, how are you going to defend yourself?"

Li Mubai reflects. In recent days, he always went out without his sword. This Feng Mao was not just anybody and enjoyed a great fame, his capacities were undoubtedly formidable. It was not obvious that he could defeat him without a weapon. On the other hand, he told himself that Xiulian, a frail and delicate young woman, had been able to oppose with bare hands four or five boors armed to the teeth, and that she had torn a sword from them, thus saving her father. How could he then back down when he thought about it, wasn't he even worth a young woman? Li Mubai said with a slight smile:

"Boss Shi, do you think I can't defeat them without my sword?"

Hearing this answer, Shi the Fat was definitely convinced that Li Mubai was someone out of the ordinary, animated with a formidable boldness, and no longer paid attention to Feng Mao. He followed the young man and they left Hanjiatan hutong towards the alley. Shi the Fat was not reassured to see Li Mubai fighting unarmed and kept giving him advice:

"Lord Li, when you fight with Feng Mao, be careful. He has the strength of an ox and his saber technique is very special. I have heard, however, that he is honest and it is unlikely that he will use any subterfuge."

Li Mubai, who was picking up his pace, exclaimed angrily:

"How could he be an honest person? If he wants to compete with me, why doesn't he just come out in broad daylight and set a date and place for a duel? No, he prefers to wait until it gets dark before landing in my alley and setting a trap for me; if that is not a subterfuge, what is it?"

Without realizing it, Li Mubai was already arriving at the northern entrance of the Prime Minister's Lane.

The faint moon was gradually hidden by the clouds. It was getting



darker and darker. This alley was not isolated, however no one was walking it at this late hour of the night. Li Mubai then turned to Shi the Fat and said:

"Head home, boss Shi. If you follow me like this, they'll think you're coming to help me and I don't want you to be involved in this!"

"I fully agree! But Lord Li, do not underestimate this Feng Mao!"

"I know!" Li Mubai nodded as he walked slowly down the alley.

Li Mubai saw absolutely no one and said to himself, "What if Fat Shi saw wrong?"

Shortly after, he arrived in front of the temple door, but it was closed. He had just sounded the knocker, when he heard someone behind him call out in a brutal voice:

"Hey! What are you doing here?"

Li Mubai turned around and saw three men, all dressed in black, coming from the south of the alley. It was very dark and he couldn't make out their faces. Li Mubai stood on the stone threshold of the gate with dignity, and addressed them very calmly:

"Are you men from the Chunyuan Agency? Are you looking for me, Li Mubai?"

The three men seemed surprised by these words. One of them turned to ask one of his companions to light a lantern. By the light of the lantern, the three individuals were able to discover Li Mubai's martial stature. The young man was facing men of about thirty, of medium height and robust. They looked furious. One of them carried under his arm several steel sabers arranged in their scabbard, another held the paper lantern. The last one was empty-handed. He had wrapped his braid around his neck and was shirtless, as if he wanted to show that not even a mass of iron could crush his sturdy chest.

Li Mubai looked the man from head to toe and asked him:

"Friend, are you Feng Mao, the Golden Sabers?"

The man approached and replied sarcastically:

"If you recognize your master Fourth-Feng, why are you asking?!"

Li Mubai got annoyed when he heard that Feng Mao claimed to be superior to him and exclaimed:

"Well, friend, be a little more polite, will you, and don't pretend to be a great lord! If you came to get me, it's good for something, so do what you have to do! You can see that I am unarmed and that no one is by my side to help me. You are free to rush at me with your sabers. But if you see me weakening, I, Li Mubai, will no longer be worthy of being a disciple of Ji Guangjie, nor the nephew by marriage of Jiang Nanhe! Feng Mao seemed surprised to hear the names of these two famous knights from Li Mubai's mouth and replied coldly:

"Do you think you might scare me by mentioning these famous heroes? Well, you have offended two of my brothers, and what's more, these days, you have made a little reputation, we absolutely have to face each other. I would love to know the real abilities of Ji Guangjie's disciple!"

It seemed to Li Mubai that Feng Mao had softened and he said to him:

"No need to waste your saliva, when I hurt your brother, Feng Long, I knew you would come. If you hadn't come, I would have gone to pick you up from Shen Prefecture. Now that we are finally face to face, I ask you: do you want to fight to the death or do you want to face me fairly? If it's a fight to the death, then take out your sabers and approach!"

The young man hit his chest while waiting for Feng Mao and his men to throw themselves on him, brandishing their sabers. Feng Mao chuckled coldly and stared at Li Mubai.

"You take me for a poor mischievous fellow. You think that in the middle of the night, finding you unarmed, we are going to attack you! I wouldn't be worthy of being a hero with such behavior! Also, even if you humiliated my brother, I never kill anyone lightly and

we won't have to fight to the death. As I expected, you are indeed not cold in the eyes; tomorrow morning, why don't you go to the Chunyuan agency in Damochang, where we face off in front of a crowd of friends and see which of us wins?"

"Excellent idea!" Li Mubai exclaimed with a broad smile. "Tomorrow, at what time should I come?"

"Tomorrow morning at eight o'clock! You can tell De Xiaofeng to come with you!"

"De Xiaofeng is not in Beijing, he has gone on an official mission. Moreover, this case does not concern him at all. Don't worry about him, this is all just for me. Tomorrow I'll be there."

Feng Mao insisted:

"Are you sure you will come?"

"The junzi (102) has only one word, I will be able to keep my promise."

"Good. Let's go now!" Feng Mao finally said to his men, turning around.

The other two glanced at Li Mubai again, then all, lanterns in hand, left the area heading north of the alley.

Li Mubai knocked on the door again and the monk finally opened the door for him.

"Lord Li," he said to him, "three men were looking for you earlier!"

"I saw them," Li Mubai replied, entering.

"Lord Li, have you seen Lord Huang today?"

"No!" exclaimed the young man, at the end of his patience. "Don't be in such a hurry for your business, I'll take care of it when the time comes!"

"Alright Alright!" Whispered the monk.

Li Mubai went back to his room and turned on the lamp. He thought about the events of the day. "This Feng Mao is ultimately a courageous and just man, he thought. Tomorrow, provided I have the upper hand, I won't have to hurt him. After the duel, the outcome of which does not matter, I will find myself completely free. I am going to leave Beijing, to go where?" Li Mubai began to worry about the fate of young Xiulian, who now resided with the Meng family, in the Xuanhua government. "How is she now?" he wondered. "I inquired about her fiancé Meng Sizhao, from De Xiaofeng among others, everyone has heard of him, but no one has ever met him. Is he still alive? He must be somewhere! He can't afford to delay Xiulian's wedding like this! It is no longer possible for him to return home to Xuanhua; in a few days, I will be on the roads, so I will find out where he is in order to comfort the young Xiulian." Inevitably this made him think of Xie Xianniang. He was convinced that these were two hindrances to his feelings and that they were closely related. If he hadn't been devastated by his encounter with Xiulian, he probably wouldn't have sought solace from a courtesan who had ended up tormenting him as well. He considered that there was no more hope with Xiulian; but what could he hope for with Xianniang? He felt compassion for her, but he was unable to get her out of her miserable condition and she did not seem enthusiastic about marrying him; if he thought about their future.

Li Mubai was spinning and turning these issues in his head, when he noticed that the third watch was already ringing. The lamp was about to go out. The flame, no bigger than a pea, could no longer dance. Li Mubai observed his precious sword hanging on the wall and all his ardor resurfaced, "How can I still indulge in such feelings, a hero can go astray sometimes; tomorrow I face the famous Feng Mao with the Golden Sabers known throughout the Zhili region! If I lose, I will immediately return home to Nangong, spend the rest of my life helping my uncle, and never talk about martial arts again. If I win, I will go on the roads, to wander in the world of Rivers and Lakes. I can go for a walk in the northern lands and learn about Meng Sizhao, or go to Jiangnan, to find out about my uncle Jiang Nanhe and see if the famous knight is still alive. Li Mubai then blew out the lamp, carefully closed his door, and lay down on his mat. He pushed the thought out of his head and fell

sound asleep.

The next morning, after grooming, Li Mubai did some boxing moves and did some sword dances in the courtyard. He was absolutely certain to beat Feng Mao. He then went back to his room to change. He put on his robe and put his sword in its scabbard; then, sword under his arm, left the temple in the direction of the north of the lane. He went to Shi the Fat tavern. In front of his shop door, the boss Shi, his arms bare, still wearing his apron, was watching the street. As soon as he saw Li Mubai, he smiled and waved at him.

"Lord Li, you are very early this morning!"

Li Mubai also smiled and entered the tavern. He put his sword down on the table and exclaimed:

"Boss Shi, give me two glasses of alcohol and a dish; next to it, to prepare me some sesame pancakes."

Shi the Fat sent the employee to take care of the patties.

He didn't have any other customers in the tavern. Shi the Fat served food and alcohol to Li Mubai. He was particularly smiling and stared at the young man with his shining eyes.

"How come you drink so little this morning?" Could it be possible that you save yourself for your victory against Feng Mao, at the Chunyuan escort agency where you are going in a moment?"

Li Mubai really found Fat Shi out of the ordinary.

"That's right," he said. "Yesterday, when you came back, I did indeed meet Feng Mao and two other men who accompanied him. He deserves his reputation as a brave man; he did not come to fight in the middle of the night three against one, but to arrange a meeting at the Chunyuan agency. He invites a few friends and we will face each other in front of them this morning. Boss Shi, if you're not too busy with your business, why don't you come?"

"Aïya," said Shi the Fat, "it's because I wouldn't dare to attend the show! Lord Li Mubai's precious sword against Feng Mao's two swords! You have really found an opponent at your size, the fight

will be fierce, it will be exciting! But I would be able to get hurt accidentally, and that would be unfair! I couldn't stand the slightest injury!"

Li Mubai smirked and didn't ask him anything more. They brought him the sesame pancakes he had ordered. Li Mubai poured the alcohol himself and devoured the dishes and pancakes.

Boss Shi came back to his side.

"Lord Li," he told him, "I don't know anything about Jianghu affairs, but I have heard of Feng Mao's reputation and his golden sabers. If you meet him later, don't underestimate him, and pay attention to his every move!"

"I see," agreed Li Mubai, "but don't worry. He is certainly more robust than me, but today I will win!"

Having said that, Li Mubai pushed his glass away, retrieved his sword and prepared to leave. He said to boss Shi again:

"I'll settle you tonight!"

"Of course, don't worry," Shi replied. "See you tonight, Lord Li!"

His gaze followed from afar the proud appearance of the young man with the precious sword.

Li Mubai left the tavern and hired a cart that headed west. Shortly after, he was already crossing the Pearl Market district, where he turned north, and then arrived at the Damochang hutong. The street of Damochang consisted primarily, with the exception of a few inns and several escort agencies, stores of weapons of all kinds, sabers, spears, swords, halberds. Most of the people coming and going on the street were certainly Jianghu people. The cart entered the hutong and immediately fell on a large entrance door south of the alley. Two men were posted in front and scanned the surroundings. Seeing Li Mubai's cart arrive, they walked up together, greeted him with folded hands and said:

"Lord Li, stop for a moment, we have to talk to you!"

Li Mubai was surprised. "Could it be the escort agency?" He wondered. He stopped the cart and asked them:

"Are you guards from the Chunyuan Agency?"

"No," one of them replied. "We are from the Taixing agency. Our master, the old escort guard Liu Qiyun, sent us. He heard that you were going to duel today with Feng Mao and he would like to talk to you before. We therefore ask you to accompany us to the agency."

Li Mubai found this all very strange. The Taixing agency was the most famous of all in Beijing. Li Mubai also remembered that this was where guard Yu Xiongyuan, the Iron Winged Eagle had once served; he was piqued with curiosity. The young man got out of the cart and agreed to follow the two men.

Someone had already announced Li Mubai's arrival to old guard Liu, who was about to greet him. Li Mubai had in front of him a man in his sixties, with beard and graying hair, full of vigor. The young man greeted him with folded hands and said:

"Elder, are you old guard Liu?"

"You flatter me," the man replied. "Yes, I am Liu Qiyun. And you, Your Excellency, are you Lord Li Mubai? Nice to meet you."

He then begged Li Mubai to come in and take a seat inside the agency office.

Tea was brought in, then Liu Qiyun struck up a conversation:

"I very often hear my friends mention your great name, Lord Li. I admire you very much. I understand that you are a disciple of the famous knights Jiang Nanhe and Ji Guangjie?"

"The knight errant Jiang Nanhe is the alliance brother of my late father; the knight Ji Guangjie was my master. When I was still in Nangong, Knight Ji taught me martial arts for four or five years."

"So you are from Nangong. Nangong and Julu are from neighboring countries. There is a man in this district named Yu Xiongyuan, the

Iron Winged Eagle, you must have heard of him?"

Li Mubai was upset to see Liu Qiyun chatting with him like this without getting to the point immediately. Now that he remembered Yu Xiulian's father like this, he felt sad. He replied briefly to Liu Qiyun:

"Old guard Yu was a good friend of my master. I have met him several times. I recently learned that he was no longer of this world."

Liu Qiyun was stunned.

"My old brother Yu is no longer of this world!" he exclaimed. "Twenty years ago he helped my late father build the reputation of this agency. I was young at the time and often asked him for advice on practicing martial arts. Subsequently, he returned home to open his own escort agency. I did not travel to the south of Zhili Province often, and he never returned to Beijing. Several years went by without us seeing each other again, but I always sent him news or gifts. Lately, I've been waiting for the Mid-Autumn Festival to send someone to bring him some specialties from the capital and see how he's doing. I never imagined he had already left us."

Liu Qiyun wiped away his tears and continued:

"Do you know what disease he succumbed to?"

Li Mubai did not want to talk about any of this and instead cared about his fight against Feng Mao. He quickly summarized how Yu Xiongyuan had become the enemy of He Feilong's family and how, forced to leave his home, he died on the way. Liu Qiyun sighed, regretfully.

Li Mubai, who wanted to cut this discussion short, asked:

"What was your reason for bringing me here today?"

Old guard Liu put aside his sad thoughts and came back to reality saying:

"If I have called you here today, Lord Li, it is to ask you not to make



Feng Mao lose face when you meet him. We have been friends for a long time already. I know he can be arrogant at times, but he's an honest and just man. He performed many righteous and generous acts in the world of Rivers and Lakes. I have always seen him help people in danger, and never do evil things. He has always been loyal to his friends. Yesterday, he came by asking me to come to the Chunyuan agency to watch a duel between you two. When I heard that you were a brilliant disciple of Ji Guangjie and Jiang Nanhe's step-nephew, I immediately feared that he would be defeated. I tried to persuade him not to confront you, to preserve your two names in this way. He didn't take my advice and I thought I'd return to see him later to try to convince him again. If I can get him to listen to reason and get him to agree to an amicable settlement, I hope you won't be mad at him!"

Li Mubai smiles:

"I absolutely don't want to become his enemy, he's the one who came to get me. If he finally gives up on our meeting and calls off the fight, how could I still offend his friends in Jianghu?"

"Lord Li, you really have a magnanimous temperament. Well, we are going to go to the Chunyuan agency together and I will try to persuade him again."

"Okay!" Li Mubai said.

The two men left the Taixing agency and walked up the street to the east. They arrived shortly after in front of the Chunyuan agency. Li Mubai noticed that the main entrance to the agency was rather dilapidated. When you walked through the gate, you came across a spacious courtyard, facing a row of buildings that made up the north wing. In front of these buildings was erected a shelter made of mats which protected shelves intended for the storage of weapons, as well as three large square tables where dishes and alcohol were placed. A few men, seeing Liu Qiyun arrive accompanied by an elegant, handsome young man with a sword under his arm, immediately thought of Li Mubai and stepped forward. About ten men also made their appearance from inside; among them were the three Feng brothers: Feng Mao, the Golden Sabers, Feng Huai,

Liu Qiyun started by making the introductions:

"This is Chang Poyu, from the Gongshun escort agency, this is Zhao Lishan, from the Taiping agency, Liu Qixi and Mao Baokun, from the Sihai agency. I finally present to you Qin Zhenyuan, the venerable master of the Marquis Qiu, the Silver Lance."

Li Mubai handed his sword to one of the servants and respectfully bowed with clasped hands, according to the custom in effect for a first meeting. Feng Huai and Feng Long glared at him; Feng Mao, on the other hand, looked rather happy and greeted Li Mubai, a fist clenched in the other hand.

They all took their places under the awning. Li Mubai made a good impression on all the escort guards and on the venerable master Qin Zhenyuan, but all thought, when they saw him, that they were in front of a scholar with a very pale face. There was no comparison between him and the sturdy and tanned Feng Mao, with strong arms and muscular chest of martial arts adepts. Everyone unanimously thought that Li Mubai was going to take a hell of a beating. How could he overcome Feng Mao, the Golden Sabers?

Feng Mao ignored Li Mubai. He served alcohol to all his guests, sat down proudly and said:

"It has been over two years since I returned to Beijing. Recently, Li Mubai injured my younger brother and said he wanted to meet with me. As soon as I found out, I immediately left Shen Prefecture for the capital. We do not know each other; if he hurt my younger brother, it's because Long isn't fighting well enough and not because he's been ruthless. As he expressed the wish to meet me, I cannot let this go. So yesterday I visited him and we agreed, him and I, to a duel to be held here today. I called you all to come to witness our clash. I would first like to clarify a few points: our duel will not be a fight to the death. We will both use our true talents, the use of hidden weapons is prohibited, and we will not have malicious bashing. Whoever loses will have to admit defeat, and if one of us is accidentally wounded to death, he will have to submit to fate!"

Everyone listened intently and approved of Feng Mao's words:

"Feng-le-Quatrième is right! During a duel between Jianghu men, the rules of the fight must be clearly stated!"

Li Mubai smirked and said nothing. He was very calm, nothing indicated that it was he who was going to fight against Feng Mao today. Liu Qiyun for his part looked very worried and hastened to say:

"So let's drop this fight!" I chatted with Lord Li, he was a good friend of the Iron Winged Eagle, old guard Yu, we are all one big family, let's forget about this duel! Feng-le-Quatrième, you are a famous hero of Zhili Province, and Lord Li is a brave newly arrived in the capital. Doesn't the proverb say: "From a fight between two tigers, one will suffer"? Both of you have been wandering around Jianghu for a few years and have managed to make a name for yourself, why should you absolutely have to fight? I hope that out of respect for me, you will prefer to become friends rather than adversaries. Isn't that what friends would do?" While drinking, Feng Mao listened to what Liu Qiyun had to say. He put down his glass and then exclaimed,

"How can you say that!" This duel is already fixed and all my friends have honored me with their presence. Not to mention that I came to the capital of Shen Prefecture as quickly as possible. Whatever happens today, Li Mubai and I are going to face each other, and see which of the two of us is stronger! I will only give up this duel if he does not want to fight, and if he admits defeat in front of everyone!"

Faced with these insulting words, Li Mubai could not contain his anger, he struck the table with his precious sword. He declared:

"Brother, you can't say that! I, Li Mubai, will never be able to admit defeat to you; today I will have to teach you who I am!"

All eyes were on Li Mubai. The elated young man continued:

"Earlier, Liu Qiyun, to preserve the understanding between us, asked me to come to his home to consult with me. I told him that if Feng Mao was conciliatory, I naturally wouldn't want to come to blows. Only now, if you really want to know which of us is the

stronger, well know that I am not afraid of you at all!"

Under his breath, Li Mubai drew his sword from the scabbard and addressed Feng Mao:

"How about we start, what do you think?!"

All exclaimed:

"The duel is justified!"

Only Liu Qiyun sighed and exclaimed:

"If so, I don't care anymore!"

Feng Mao was so angry that his tanned face turned purple. He rose from his seat and took off his shirt, revealing his arms and muscular chest, and exclaimed:

"I'll get my sabers!"

Li Mubai grabbed his sword and left gathered as well. Feng Mao whirled his sabers as he walked through the middle of the courtyard, kicking up dust from his two feet shod in light boots. Li Mubai took off his dress, he only had a short shirt and cream-colored silk pants. He calmly walked up to Feng Mao and said:

"You have the honor to start!"

"Thank you!" Exclaimed Feng Mao.

In a whisper, the pair of sabers fell on Li Mubai. The young man dodged the blow and struck his sword against the saber held in Feng Mao's right hand. The sword then bypassed the saber and fell to the level of Feng Mao's belt. The latter spread the sword from his other saber and attacked with his released weapon. Li Mubai parried and, in a long stride, leaped behind his opponent's back, brandished his blade and struck. Feng Mao quickly spun around and turned the sword away from his two sabers. The mastery of the two opponents was clean and neat, the hosts could only exclaim together:

"Nice shots!"

Li Mubai turned his sword away and took a few steps back. Feng Mao wielding his sabers came in force. Li Mubai did not move away, he danced his blade and struck both swords, blocking Feng Mao's momentum. Nothing could be heard but the crash of iron against steel. Feng Mao then rushed fiercely at Li Mubai, one saber attacking his left shoulder, the other intended to hit him in the chest. Li Mubai turned quickly, performed the Falcon's twist (103), and struck his blade against the two sabers consecutively. He leapt to Feng Mao's left, his foot flew off to strike his opponent's left wrist. With a thud, one of Feng Mao's sabers fell to the ground.

Feng Mao only had one sword left, but he did not give up the game and rushed again at Li Mubai. The young man became more ferocious. After four or five exchanges, Li Mubai slammed his fist hard on Feng Mao's right shoulder. He immediately felt tingling and then intense pain, and was unable to support his sword. He quickly took a few steps back, but was then surprised to see Li Mubai chasing him, kicking the sword with his foot. Feng Mao could only drop his other sword to the ground. Disarmed, he retreated. Beside him, his brother Feng Long quickly grabbed a spear and handed it to him. As soon as he had the spear in hand, Feng Mao rushed again at Li Mubai who parried and retaliated vigorously, hitting Feng Mao in the head. The latter raised the spear horizontally for protection. Then sounded a crack, the handle of the spear had just been cut in half by the sharp blade. Feng Mao angrily threw the two pieces to the ground and rushed unarmed towards Li Mubai. Li Mubai did not want to hurt him but raised his sword, and said to him:

"You still haven't confessed yourself conquered?"

Liu Qiyun stepped forward and tried to reason with them:

"It's enough, stop!"

Feng Mao was drenched in sweat. Red with anger, he fixed Li Mubai with a demonic gaze. He suddenly took a long stride and jumped in surprise on the young man, gripping his right shoulder. He tried to grab Li Mai's sword; but how could the latter let him do it? Li Mubai firmly held back his blade. The two men then began to

spin around, performing small jumps, neither letting go of the sword. Liu Qiyun almost got pushed around by them and stepped aside but continued to gesture, shouting:

"But stop, stop!"

The others looked at them without moving, terrified.

Feng Huai then exclaimed:

"Nerve, let's see!"

His intervention seemed to encourage his brother somewhat, who then gathered all his strength to try again to wrest the sword from Li Mubai's hands, and thus turn his defeat into victory. But nothing helped, even with all his strength, he could not recover the sword. Malicious Feng Mao suddenly jumped at Li Mubai's throat to strangle him. The latter struck him with a punch in the chest and a violent kick in the lower abdomen. With a thud, as if a rock fell to the ground, Feng Mao sprawled out full length. Li Mubai stepped back, the left shoulder that Feng Mao had clung to was all red. Feng Mao's shoulder was turning from blue to purple. Feng Mao sat down and raised his face; he was crying in pain. Liu Qiyun hastened to support him.

Feng Huai, the Iron Staff, Feng Long, the Small Lance, along with a few other guards then took out their weapons and rushed together at Li Mubai. Li Mubai, on guard, was waiting for them without the slightest fear. Feng Mao straightened up and called his brothers back:

"Stay reasonable! Li Mubai surpasses me in martial arts, I lost, full stop!"

Feng Mao wiped away his tears, then greeted Li Mubai with folded hands. "Brother Li, no one will be able to treat me as a hero from now on and I will leave the southern part of Zhili province to you!"

Li Mubai had just beaten Feng Mao, he was of course very proud of it; but seeing his opponent so generous, he felt a little embarrassed and answered him with folded hands:

"Brother, how can you say that? I had a hard time beating you today, and I highly value your art!"

"It's over for me, sighed Feng Mao, waving his hand. My reputation for the past ten years is now in your hands! I don't hate you, but I won't roam Jianghu anymore!"

"If that's so," said Li Mubai, "that doesn't make me a magnanimous man!"

Feng Mao wiped away his tears and put his clothes on his shoulders. He stepped forward and shook Li Mubai's hand.

"Brother Li," he told him. "How could we not comment on today's confrontation! So let's go back and sit down and drink!"

"These words are worthy of a hero of Jianghu!" Liu Qiyun approved.

Feng Mao was still holding Li Mubai's hand and they all went back to their seats. Only Feng Huai and Feng Long, furious, took refuge inside. Feng Mao personally served alcohol to all his guests. He drank a few drinks himself then said with regret:

"All of you who are here, you have all seen it clearly, in Jianghu there is a hero whose talent is far superior to mine. I invite you to greet my departure, because I will be returning in a moment. After that, if I am to come back to Beijing, it will be as an honest man. Never again will I fight against someone to assert my supremacy!"

A bitter smile appeared on his face. They all tried to calm him down, but he was still completely dejected. His decision was made, he would leave the capital today and withdraw from Jianghu forever.

Li Mubai highly esteemed Feng Mao. This man was admittedly brutal, but remained just and upright, it was the kind of friend he wanted to have. Amiable and smiling, Li Mubai addressed Feng Mao:

"Brother, you have a lot of friends in Jianghu, do you know a man named Meng Sizhao?"

"I don't know anyone by that name," he replied. "Is he an escort guard or does he just roam the world of Rivers and Lakes?"

Li Mubai did not have time to clarify, Liu Qiyun was already asking:

"Is this Meng Sizhao, the second son of Meng Yongxiang from the Xuanhua government?"

"Indeed," agreed Li Mubai. "When they were children, a marriage was arranged between Meng Sizhao and Yu Xiulian, the daughter of guard Yu Xiongyuan. Now that old guard Yu is gone, his wife and daughter are living with the Meng family. Last year, Meng Sizhao was the cause of an incident and fled. His family looked for him everywhere, never finding him. Old Guard Meng instructed me to find out and track him down when I was in the capital."

"Last year," Liu Qiyun sighed, "older brother Meng sent me a message to find out where his younger brother might be. I have never met him ; I asked many friends to find out about him, but we couldn't find any information. I never imagined that Meng Sizhao still wouldn't have returned home today. Hey! The fate of this young Yu Xiulian is very bitter, her father passes away and she has no news of her fiancé!"

Li Mubai suddenly felt sorry. The hosts remained dubious, only Mao Baokun from the Sihai agency listening attentively. Mao Baokun was from Julu district, he was the brother-in-arms of Sun Zhengli, known as the Eagle of the Five Talons, and had known old guard Yu. Two years ago, when he returned to the country for a few months, he had also met the beautiful Xiulian. She had made him lose his mind, but fearing his brother in arms, he had not dared to try anything. Now that he heard Li Mubai and Liu Qiyun say that the old guard was dead, that the young Xiulian was staying temporarily in Xuanhua and that she had no record of her future husband, he strained his ears and ended up asking:

"What did old guard Yu die of?"

Liu Qiyun observed Mao Baokun and replied:

"It's true, you are also from Julu!"



"Not only am I from Julu," replied Mao Baokun, "but above all the old guard has always been kind to me. His disciple Sun Zhengli, the Eagle of the Five Talons, is also my brother in arms. I even met the young Xiulian several times, she called me Sixth big brother Mao!"

Li Mubai glanced at Mao Baokun. He knew that everyone present today was either the head of their own escort agency or a master of kung fu. He therefore carefully described Meng Sizhao to them so that they could talk about it around them and instruct other people to find him. Liu Qiyun again insisted that all come to his aid, which they granted him. Li Mubai drank a few more cups of alcohol, then picked up his clothes and took his leave. Feng Mao and Liu Qiyun accompanied him to the entrance.

"Lord Li," Liu Qiyun told him, "come and see me when you have time!"

Li Mubai, sword under his arm, greeted him with folded hands:

"Be sure I'll come visit you one day!"

Feng Mao clenched a fist in his other hand and said to Li Mubai:

"Brother Li, I hope we will meet again!"

"To the pleasure!" Li Mubai greeted him with folded hands.

The young man turned west and left Damochang Street. He found a small restaurant to eat in, then rented a cart and drove back to Faming Temple.

Although he was victorious over Feng Mao, the Golden Sabers, the most famous hero in all of Zhili Province, Li Mubai was brooding and not rejoicing like when he had beaten Huang Jibei or beaten the Gros Lu San. Feng Mao was truly an honorable person, and he had decided to withdraw from Jianghu forever. Li Mubai was sorry for him. He still said to himself that, despite the failures of recent years and the fact that he was inactive, he already enjoyed a great reputation. He realized that in the long run he would end up envying him and provoking him relentlessly. He therefore resolved to leave Beijing in a few days.

Li Mubai was lost in thought. The cart soon arrived in Caishikou and entered the Prime Minister's lane. Ahead of the cart, someone started calling him:

"Lord Li! Today you must be happy to have beaten Feng Mao, the Golden Sabers!"

Li Mubai looked up and saw the boss Shi. He was all smiles and bulging his big belly as if to show his own joy. Li Mubai was puzzled. "He did not accompany me and did not attend the fight, how can he know that?"

Li Mubai, sword in hand, got out of the cart and paid.

"Boss Shi, who told you that I had defeated Feng Mao?"

"No one needed to tell me! I saw it with my own eyes. After you left, Lord Li, I finally followed you. From the entrance of the Chunyuan agency, I saw very well the kick you gave Feng Mao... "

While relating what he had seen, Fat Shi executed the blow Li Mubai had dealt Feng Mao with his leg.

"It was really fast and precise! Lord Li, you can truly be said to be the capital's first hero!"

## Chapter 15

*Misfortune strikes suddenly,*

*The hero knows the jails of the capital;*

*Struck by the blows of misfortune,*

*The famous courtesan revisits her past.*

Li Mubai was smiling, but inside he was very surprised. "I'm going to have to watch out for Shi," he thought. "I'm sure he's no ordinary trader and has a lot of background!"

The young man, still smiling, stared at the corpulent boss who was not, however, a man practicing martial arts. Shi the Fat then offered to come and have a drink at the tavern.

"I've already drunk quite a bit at the Chunyuan agency," Li Mubai replied. "I would like to go back to the temple for a nap. We will meet again this evening!"

"Okay," agreed Fat Shi, "so see you tonight!"

Li Mubai nodded and continued down the Prime Minister's Lane.

At the temple, Li Mubai passed the monk who said to him:

"Huang the fourth lord has just passed. You weren't there and he left it for you."

Li Mubai picked up a business card. Why did the Skinny Buddha Amida come back to see him? He put the card aside. The monk was lost in his thoughts, as if he wanted to ask him something. Realizing that this was not the best time to ask the young man if he had bothered to talk to Huang Jibei, he ended up slipping away.

Li Mubai began to think back to Shi the Fat; he found him decidedly suspicious. "They say that in Beijing we meet all kinds of people and that the city is full of anonymous talents. Shi the Fat seems to be a

regular in Jianghu and a follower of martial arts. Xie Xianniang is also a strange person, why is she hiding a dagger in her pillow? Li Mubai thought to himself that he should come see them and ask them both about their real identities, but he changed his mind. "Xianniang is so sweet and so lovable, Shi the Fat is so good at acting to pretend to be a candid; no doubt they have a terrible past and will not want to reveal their identity, I do not want to waste my time listening to their evasions! Feng Mao has probably already left Beijing to return to Shen Prefecture. I will now benefit from his prestige. I spend my days doing nothing and playing the hero by being considered the most talented man in martial arts in the capital; what can it mean? It's decided, tomorrow, I will say goodbye to my uncle and return the account booklet to the De family. I will leave Beijing the day after tomorrow. No need to plan now; who knows what tomorrow will bring?"

After the nap, Li Mubai stayed in his room. In the evening, he decided to go to the tavern to have dinner and chat with Shi the Fat. Despite the fires of the setting sun which were still spreading here and there on the horizon, it was particularly dark in the heart of the old temple. The bats appeared and disappeared so surreptitiously that they made one think of ghosts which had suddenly risen from the tombs located in the two corridors.

Li Mubai did not take an overcoat, he walked out of the monastery with his hands behind his back. He didn't expect to find himself face to face with four or five men coming to meet him. As they approached, Li Mubai could see that he was dealing with officers. Two of them bore shackles, the others clubs and daggers on their belts. One of the officers exclaimed:

"Hey! What are you doing here?"

Li Mubai was very surprised and replied:

"Well, I'm staying here temporarily at the temple."

"What's your name?" the man continued.

"My name is Li Mubai," he replied quietly.

He had not finished his sentence when the two men holding the irons came towards him, shaking them with a resounding noise, and tried to put them around his neck. Li Mubai changed his expression and sharply pushed aside the shackles, taking a few steps back. One of the officers then took out a dagger and exclaimed in fury:

"Do you dare stand up to the local authorities?"

"I am not against the authorities at all," said Li Mubai, "but I am a law-abiding person who has never committed a crime. If you want to take me away, you must first explain to me what crime I could have committed!"

Li Mubai stood with dignity but was shaking with anger.

One of the men stepped forward, tapped Li Mubai on the shoulder and said:

"Friend, actually, we don't quite know why we have to take you. His Excellency the Governor has asked us to do so and there is nothing we can do about it. You have to follow us. If you have something to say, you have to tell the yamen!"

"That's it! We are all friends!" replied another officer. "Whatever the facts, you have to let us take you, period!"

Li Mubai knew it was a blow from Fat Lu San. He understood that he had no choice and could only follow them. He declared:

"Well, I'll go with you for a walk, but I have a clear conscience and I know I have nothing to be ashamed of!"

The officers promptly passed the shackles over to Li Mubai, and while pushing and lecturing him, they exited north of the Prime Minister's Lane. There a cart awaited them. One of the men begged Li Mubai to get on and took a seat next to him. The other four officers followed on foot, in the evening twilight and the creaking of wheels on the cobblestones. Without realizing the time that had passed, they arrived at the yamen. They stopped in front of one of the side doors and supported Li Mubai to get out of the car. They took off his chains and took him to prison. One of the officials from

the Yamen Punishment Department, a man named Hu Qitu, immediately sent a trusted man to deliver a message to Lord Lu San. Hu Qitu told him to convey this: "The dangerous bandit Li Mubai has just been captured and has been imprisoned. In the next few days, under torture, he will confess guilt for his misdeeds." The messenger, whose name was Xiaozhang, left the yamen heading west of the city, to go directly to Lord Lu San, who resided on the shores of Lake Taiping.

Gros Lu San was giving a reception at his home. He only regaled a few of his most intimate friends, such as His Excellency Xu, the former minister assistant at the Ministry of Ceremonies, or His Excellency Liu the imperial censor, as well as Jiao Wu, the steward of one of the princely houses. Two lovely maids looked after the service and filled their glasses. The most smiling Fat Lu San addressed Imperial Censor Liu:

"I took care of everything for the room, she is just waiting to receive the newlywed who will become our old friend Xu."

Beside them, Jiao Wu laughed out loud:

"Now you will have to shave your beard, Lord Xu, so as not to irritate your new bride's cheeks too much."

Xu the minister's assistant was overjoyed and exclaimed shamelessly:

"Of course I am thinking about shaving, but I am only afraid that I will be suspected of something and that I will be accused (104)."

Saying this, he pointed to the imperial censor. The latter raised his glass of alcohol to his lips and exclaimed:

"At the censor's office, we don't take care of people who shave their beards!"

The four men all burst out laughing. The two young women poured alcohol for them again, and the bracelets they wore on their delicate wrists rattled. Imperial Censor Liu took a sip of the drink and exclaimed:

"By the way, I've never met this young Cuixian yet!"

"But nothing could be easier!" Lu San replied. "I'll present her to you tomorrow. You know the beauty of Change, the beauty of the moon, well Cuixian is also beautiful."

Jiao Wu clapped and laughed, saying:

"If so, Lord Xu will visit the moon soon!"

Lord Xu nodded thoughtlessly, while stuffing a piece of Peking duck into his mouth. He had hardly any teeth left and one wondered how he still chewed. Fat Lu San said to him:

"Did you understand or not? Jiao Wu says you are Lord Moon Rabbit's replacement (105)!"

Lord Xu smirked and continued to chew the duck tips with his gums. Everyone burst out laughing again.

A young servant of about fifteen, suddenly appeared and came to whisper a few words in Lu San's ear. The latter replied:

"Make him wait in the reception hall."

Then Lu San addressed his guests:

"I'll let you chat among yourselves, I'll be back in a moment." He promptly left the room to go to the reception hall. Xiaozhang was waiting for him there and greeted him respectfully when he entered. Xiaozhang made sure he was Lu San, then said to him:

"It's my uncle Hu who sent me to tell you that the gangster Li Mubai has been captured. He is now in prison. As of tomorrow, we will be able to interrogate him under torture, to make him confess his crimes."

Lu San was delighted.

"Good, that's very good," he said. "Now that I know it, you can go home. Tell your uncle that I thank him very much. Tomorrow, if he has time, come see me at my business in the west of town!"

Xiaozhang nodded and Lu San handed him two banknotes taken from his pocket:

"Rent a cart to get in," he told him.

Xiaozhang initially refused the money, then finally accepted it. He greeted Lu San and left the scene.

Fat Lu San joined his friends, all smiles. He didn't tell them anything about the matter and continued drinking and chatting as if nothing had happened; he seemed a lot happier all the same. After the feast, Censor Liu and Jiao Wu smoked some opium, then returned home. Only Xu, the assistant minister, remained. The two men, face to face, were stretched out on a rosewood bed and smoked opium. Lu San said to him:

"Earlier, Hu Qitu sent someone to tell me that this fellow Li had just been arrested. He is accused of being a famous bandit, which means that it is all over for him. And which means, for me, that my anger will be able to subside, and also for you, that you no longer have a rival. You should go to Xianniang soon and force her to accept your request. Then you can finally get it back and everything will be settled."

"Although I hate this so-called Li," replied Lord Xu, frowning, "I think the sentence is a little too harsh. He must have a lot of friends in the Rivers and Lakes world, what are we going to do if they ever want to avenge him and come and get us? In my opinion, you should tell Hu Qitu to give him several dozen blows with the stick, keep him locked up for several months and then release him, that will be enough!"

"Brother, do not get angry but it would be misplaced benevolence! This Li seduced and misled Xianniang. Now she suspects you of having two concubines, whereas if he had not been there, she would have followed you for a long time already. You asked her for her hand several times, but she never gave an answer! Now that this Li has been arrested, she will no longer be under his spell and will agree to follow you. In addition, this Li comes from who knows where and has no social rank; it is only because he is supported by De Xiaofeng that he behaves in such a scandalous way. I'm not



talking about the fact that he beat me up, but the fact that he beat Huang Jibei. Even today, I heard that he defeated Feng Mao, the famous escort guard from Shen Prefecture known as the Golden Sabers. This Li is just a poor vagabond, without family or work; because he masters the martial arts, he opposed us. Should we accept it and forgive it? I'd rather spend some money and have it over for good!"

Lord Xu still frowned:

"I'm always worried that he may have friends who are not afraid of anything, who will no doubt come and get us and get us into trouble. We have a rank to keep; how can we defend ourselves?"

"Don't worry," Fat Lu San replied, mocking Lord Xu's lack of courage, "nothing will happen to us. First, because I have carefully researched this Li, he is a loner. Apart from an uncle named Qi Dianchen, a poor official in charge of the Ministry of Punishments, he only knows De Xiaofeng. For now, he has left the capital. He doesn't have any other friends in town. Second, I will be able to appease my anger, and Huang Jibei can too. He and Qiu Guangchao are very good friends, and with them on our side, we won't be afraid of any cheeky scoundrels whatsoever!"

Assistant Xu, seeing that his friend mentioned Huang Jibei, regained some courage. Huang Jibei was extremely talented in martial arts, everyone knew that. Even though he had heard that he suffered a loss to Li Mubai, Huang Jibei had several friends in Jianghu as well as many very capable men under his command. Lord Xu then felt reassured.

"Good," he exclaimed. "So you will go see Huang Jibei in a few days!"

"I'll see him tomorrow. It's only nine o'clock," Fat Lu San said, "looking at his gold pocket watch, what if we go to the alley in the Field of Maneuvering and ask Xianniang and her mother to come? We could question her again and know her decision."

"How is it that you are in more of a hurry than me?" Xu exclaimed. "The city gates must already be closed, so let's put it off,

will you?"

Fat Lu San was starting to feel weary as well, and thought to himself that, anyway, if he went now to his other residence in the alleyway of the Field of Maneuvers, his concubine probably wouldn't want to see him.

"Well, we'll talk about this again tomorrow!"

Xu the assistant minister took a few more puffs of opium and then went home.

The next day, Lu San went to the east of the city, to the Beixin Bridge area, to find Huang Jibei, the Lean Buddha Amida. He explained to him that he had arranged to have Li Mubai thrown into the yamen prisons and then asked for his help in case some Jianghu men came to cause him trouble afterwards. Fat Lu San believed that Huang Jibei would be delighted to hear that Li Mubai had been arrested, and that it would bring some relief to his anger. It did not happen; Lean Buddha Amida answered him coldly:

"Li Mubai is not an enemy. I am not in any way involved in his arrest. We did face each other once. He punched me and I punched him too. So we can say that we are on an equal footing. I then offered him an armed fight, but he did not accept. I saw that he was not from here. He harbored no hatred towards me, so I was lenient."

Fat Lu San, seeing Huang Jibei talking like this without seriously meeting his expectations, felt anger rising in him. "How could I, Lu San," he thought, "ask you that, Huang Jibei?" Huang Jibei continued:

"But if in the future you have any trouble, let me know, I'll find a solution."

Fat Lu San felt somewhat reassured by these last words. He stayed a little while longer and took his leave.

In the evening, he went to his concubine in the alley of the Field of Maneuvers and waited there for the arrival of Xu the assistant minister. His concubine was called Ya'e; he had taken her out of a

brothel. Lu San already had another concubine in his house who could not share the same roof as Ya'e. He had therefore built this little one-story house which had become the luxurious and secret residence of his second concubine. The words addressed to Xianniang in preparation for a meeting with Lord Xu mostly indicated this address. Today Fat Lu San and Lord Xu were going to discuss the fate of Xianniang. After her marriage, she could come and live here. Xianniang and Ya'e got along well. The two men spent their days together having fun in this residence.

Xu the assistant minister was a renowned scholar of the capital. His parallel sentences sold for several hundred liang of silver, and his family's wealth was colossal. He was also a prince's teacher, and would soon become provincial governor outside of Beijing. Fat Lu San had used Xianniang to be able to get to know him. He had then obtained important advantages for his business and the development of his banks, and facilities in his relations with the administration. So he was anxiously awaiting Lord Xu.

Ya'e, whom he pampered so much, was by his side and lit the opium for him. As she massaged him, she asked for another gold bracelet.

"Soon Cuixian will come and live here," Ya'e told him. "She has a lot more business than me, I'm going to sound like a poor wretch, what am I going to look like?"

"Don't worry, Lu San replied, smiling. I will soon be an extremely rich man and you will have the bracelet you want; whether you want a very simple one or a very heavy one, I will make it when you want. Only, until then, don't bother me!"

Ya'e, delighted, pampered Fat Lu San. She remained envious of Xianniang, however. "Okay, Lu San has some money," she said to herself, "but in the end, when there is only one merchant left. No matter how rich he is, no one will ever call him His Excellency. And then, he will always be a miser, a penny will always remain a penny for him. It must not be the same with Lord Xu. He is both rich and in high places. How lucky is this Xianniang! She will become both the wife of a rich man and the wife of a high official!"

It had cost Lu San to give Ya'e another bracelet and he demanded as compensation that she continued to pamper him. A man was then heard coughing in the courtyard. It was Lord Xu who was arriving.

He entered the room still coughing. Bent in two, it was like a dried peeled shrimp. Fat Lu San sat down and exclaimed:

"My old brother, why are you only coming now? Could it be that my two sisters-in-law (106) clung to you and didn't let you go?"

"No, that's not it," Xu said, coughing. "Now my old kidney pains are back! We made an appointment yesterday and I really made a great effort to come!"

While speaking, he settled down on the bed. Ya'e hurriedly made him an opium pipe which she handed him. Fat Lu San then asked him if he was accompanied by his servant Wang'er.

"Yes, he's outside!"

Fat Lu San tells Ya'e to go out and tell Wang'er to go to the House of Sumptuous Treasures right away to find Cuixian. Ya'e did as he asked and was thus able to speak to the handsome Wang'er of the Xu residence.

Fat Lu San and Assistant Minister Xu smoked face to face for a long time, before Xianniang finally arrived with her mother, Lady Xie. When Lord Xu saw the young woman, he found her even prettier than the other times. She was wearing a black silk jacket and pale blue silk pants. So graceful and such simple elegance. Lord Xu instantly forgot his back pain and said with a smile:

"Yesterday, I didn't see you all day, have your pains gone?"

"I'm better," Xianniang smiles, "I'm sorry I caused Lord Xu trouble!"

"This child is sensitive," said Lady Xie, "the slightest annoyance gives her chest pains!"

"You have to know how to take care of yourself to get better!" Xianniang said. Kneeling on the bed, she picked up a small wand and set about lighting the two men's opium. Fat Lu San stopped her

and said:

"Don't bother, we'll do it ourselves!"

He turned to one of his servants and ordered:

"Go get two small stools so the concubine and Cuixian can sit down. Lady Xie," he continued, turning to her, "sit where you want, I'll let you!"

Shortly after, the servant returned and set the two stools against the bed. Ya'e leaned against Fat Lu San and Xianniang leaned against Lord Xu, both half seated, half reclining. Suddenly Fat Lu San pretended to be surprised and announced:

"Xianniang, I have something to tell you. Do you know Li Mubai? Guess what he's doing?"

On behalf of Li Mubai, Xianniang's cheeks took on the color of clouds at sunset and she forced herself to smile:

"I heard he was a xiucai (29)."

"What do you mean a xiucai," chuckled Fat Lu San, "he's a Jianghu thief! Yesterday he was exposed and arrested by the yamen. We will undoubtedly cut off his head!"

Xianniang's face immediately changed color. Lady Xie, stunned, exclaimed:

"What! This courteous and refined young man is in fact a thief!"

"What do you mean, courteous and refined?" Fat Lu San asked with an expression of exasperation. "You have seen that with his knowledge of martial arts, he attacks others at the slightest opportunity. He hit me, he hit Huang the Fourth Lord and also several famous escort guards in the capital. He always refused to work. He only goes to brothels, always well dressed, but where does he get his income? I had suspected him for a long time, and indeed, he was caught yesterday. He is a brigand from another province, who has already made several big blows after his arrival in the capital."

Xianniang was terrified and heartbroken. Her graceful and delicate little body kept shaking.

"The yamen had unmasked him for a while now," Fat Lu San continued. "All the money he stole, he spent by your side!"

"But," cried Lady Xie, "we didn't know he was a thief!"

Xianniang let her tears fall.

"The yamen doesn't care whether or not you knew he was a thief, but he knows that Li Mubai spent all the money with you, and therefore considers you to be guilty, just as 'a receiver'! But don't worry, he said changing his tone, His Excellency Xu and I have already taken care of the matter and no one will come and stop you, however you will no longer be able to reside at the House of Sumptuous Treasures."

Lady Xie then begged.

"But," she said, "Lord Lu San, Excellency Xu, have mercy on us, go and ask the yamen of..."

She did not finish her sentence and began to cry desperately. Fat Lu San pretended to exhale long sighs and said:

"I am very sad for you. If you are no longer allowed to work in this house, how are you going to manage to live, having no more housing?"

Dame Xie jumped at the chance:

"The last time," she said, "didn't Lord Lu San mention a possible union between my daughter and Lord Xu? Not only would you do us great honor by asking that Cuixian become his concubine, but you would also be our benefactors. Cuixian, what are you waiting for to solicit these two lords! Fat Lu San glanced at Lord Xu. He wore an air of satisfaction, as if thinking, "So, big brother, what do you think of Fat Lu San's tricks?". He watched as the sobbing Xianniang hid her face with a handkerchief. She was really painful to see, and it kindled his jealousy a little. Such a beautiful woman, he thought, how could I have left her to this dingy old man, it really

is a waste! After their union, he thought finally as he reconsidered the situation, she's going to come and live here. In the long run, won't she be like someone from home?"

Not seeming at all worried, Fat Lu San exclaimed:

"If Xianniang unites with Lord Xu and spends the rest of her life with him, it will naturally be an incredible chance for you! Xianniang, you will be able to enjoy life and be happy, and you will have no torment for the rest of your life. Besides, if your daughter becomes His Excellency Xu's concubine, no one from the yamen will dare to come and hold you accountable. In some time, His Excellency Xu will be promoted to provincial military governor (107). It will not be convenient to bring his family, but your daughter will accompany him, of course. In the province where he will officiate, who will know that your daughter was a courtesan? What officer would not respectfully present gifts to the mother of the Governor General's wife?" Lady Xie was smiling through her tears.

"Hey! Lord Lu San, I am not worthy of your words! If His Excellency Xu is charitable and takes my daughter as his concubine, and I as his servant, we will never forget the blessings of your two lordships!"

Xianniang found her mother's behavior to be vile. Lord Xu had already repeatedly expressed the wish to take her as a concubine. Because of her meeting with Li Mubai, she had spent a lot of time thinking about it without being able to make up her mind and still did not know whether or not she was going to accept this proposal or not. Today, due to Li Mubai's involvement in a court case and her past misfortunes, she really did not see how to get out of this painful situation and preserve her life and that of her mother, without reluctantly accepting her fate of concubine. Her tears redoubled then. She kept sobbing. Lord Xu hugged her and tried to reassure her.

"Everything will work out for the best," he told her. "We must not cry like this."

Fat Lu San continued, letting the smoke escape:

"His Excellency Xu has had eyes on you for a long time. I have already spoken to you and your mother about it several times, but your answers have always been ambiguous; you don't say that you accept, nor clearly that you refuse. Now that this affair with Li Mubai has broken out, Lord Xu begged me to clear this up with you and see if Xianniang finally wants to marry him. If this is the case, you will leave the House of Sumptuous Treasures tomorrow to stay at the Gongxing Inn for a few days. After your union, you and your mother will move in here, with me. The three rooms of the west wing will come back to you, Xianniang, and Lady Xie will settle in the two rooms of the east wing. When all your things have been taken, I will take two more maids to take care of you. Although you have no social position, Lord Xu asked me to open an account for you in one of my banks, where he will deposit two thousand Ranks of money, and to give you a passbook. All of this of course, if you accept, Xianniang. If you refuse, I regret to tell you that, since His Excellency Xu is an official, he will no longer be able to claim to know you, you who are now embroiled in a compromising affair with this notorious thief."

Lady Xie, who was both delighted and terrified, rushed to Xianniang and said:

"Xianniang, you have to consent! Quickly present your thanks to His Excellency Xu and Lord Lu San for their favors!"

Xianniang still had a few convulsions from her sobs. She wiped away her tears and said:

"With Lord Xu's love for me, how could I still not consent to it? My mother and I will therefore be leaving the House of Sumptuous Treasures."

At the young woman's pleasant response, Fat Lu San let out his joy in a resounding laugh and exclaimed, slapping Lord Xu's shoulder:

"Big brother, I have fulfilled my role of intermediary for your union, I am now only waiting to drink the wine of your wedding party!"

Xianniang greeted and thanked Xu the assistant minister and Fat Lu San. Ya'e and Lady Xie presented their congratulations to Lord Xu.



He was so happy that his back pain and cough resumed. But he tried not to let it show and asked Lady Xie about any debts to be paid off.

"We do have a few," she replied. "We owe a hundred Row of money to the brothel and a few unpaid odds and ends; in all, we should not arrive at two hundred Ranks!"

"Forget it," said Fat Lu San. "Tomorrow, Lord Xu, open the account for them and take them to my bank in the west of town to collect the money, and that will be settled!"

Lord Xu questioned Xianniang whether she wanted anything else, but she refused and said:

"I don't need anything, I have enough clothes and jewelry. Besides, it's too late to be able to have anything made for me before the wedding."

"Yet I find that the color of your clothes is a bit faded, and then you absolutely need a bright red set."

"My daughter has a jacket and pants of this color. These clothes are a bit dated, yes, but they are quite presentable."

Xianniang, hearing her mother talk about this red outfit, suddenly remembered her painful past. Tears came to her eyes, but she forced herself to contain the pain.

Fat Lu San, seeing that Lord Xu seemed upset about these trivial matters, laughed yellow.

"Everything is settled now!" he exclaimed. "I don't think there will be a lot of people. In any case, Xianniang, you will have to dress in a less common way, and if you dress elegantly and in a more colorful way, Lord Xu, for his part, will therefore naturally have to wear the headdress of high officials with the two buttons. indicating his rank!"

This made Lord Xu laugh, but also made him cough. The discussion dragged on for a bit, then Xianniang and her mother withdrew and drove back.

All the way, Xianniang did not stop crying, not drying her tears until they arrived in front of the House of Sumptuous Treasures. Lady Xie was delighted and felt light as she got out of the car. When Xianniang in turn dismounted, her mother supported her by the arm. As they walked through the front door, one of the young servants of the house exclaimed:

"You are back, Xianniang, this man has been waiting for you for a while!"

The young woman was surprised and observed the rather stout and tall man, without a beard and who looked like a wealthy client. He wore a gray official's robe and a black gauze waistcoat, a small black crepe headdress adorned with a large pearl. He was waving a folding fan and smiling at Xianniang.

"My daughter is getting married tomorrow," exclaimed Lady Xie, "she no longer receives clients from now on."

"I am sent by De the fifth lord," he declared, "I have to speak to Xianniang."

Xianniang wondered if De the Fifth Lord was De Xiaofeng, Li Mubai's wealthy friend. She shivered and replied:

"What do you have to tell me?"

"There is a lot to say," replied the man. "I will explain everything to you in detail when we are settled in your home."

Xianniang was scared but didn't seem to have a choice. Lady Xie was upset to take this stout client upstairs, but since it was an official and probably someone wealthy, she did not dare to offend him.

In the bedroom, Xianniang picked out some candles and asked:

"What's your name, lord?"

"My name is Shi."

"Sit down, Lord Shi," Xianniang said, straining to smile.

"I'm not sitting down," he replied. "I come to tell you that Li Mubai, a client with whom you are intimate, was arrested yesterday by the yamen. I happen to be a friend of his!"

The faces of the two women changed expression.

"Li Mubai is an honest person. But he has character and did not hesitate to offend Fat Lu San and Xu the assistant minister; So these two bastards went to bribe the yamen administration officials to falsely accuse Li Mubai of robbery and sentence him to death. Only, and first, they have no proof, second, they have no witnesses. In Beijing, Li Mubai has many friends and will be rescued in a few days. I also come to tell you that Fat Lu San and Lord Xu will take advantage of this to force you to accept their marriage proposal; above all, you must not follow them. Li Mubai has always treated you well and you owe it to yourself to be loyal to him. If not, you can be sure that when he gets out of prison, he won't leave you alone. And if I, Shi, learn that too, I won't forgive you either!"

The features of his chubby face took on a stern expression and his demeanor was truly threatening. Both women were white with fear, their hearts were pounding and their legs were shaking.

"You understood me correctly," the man continued.

"Yes," Xianniang agreed.

"Good!" He exclaimed before turning around and leaving the room.

Soon after, they heard his heavy footsteps coming down the stairs.

The man was gone.

Xianniang hid her face with her hands to cry; she was suffocating with sobs. Lady Xie kept chatting and tormenting herself.

"What is this story! We have already accepted Lord Xu's proposal, how could we come back to this now? What is more, we live off prostitution, we look at the client who has the money and we try to make a marriage with him! Let this Li go to hell; because he spent a few coins with us, he thinks he can prevent your marriage to lord Xu? Cutting off his head is not enough! It's all your fault," she

continued, threatening Xianniang with her finger, "you only saw his charm! What happened to you wasting your time with this man with no money? If it had been up to me, the day after he threw up on your bed, I wouldn't have seen him again. And it is unbelievable that he struck Lord Lu San! Fortunately he was unmasked and arrested, and we came very close to getting involved in the affair too! Think about what your father recommended to you before he died! How many trials have I had to endure with you? Do you want to spend half your life working in this brothel? Or do you prefer to leave with this penniless and continue to suffer? This is no longer the time to pray to Buddha, His Excellency Xu is very fond of us, and then the wealthy Lord Lu San helps us both in this matter. In no time you will be the wife of a high official, and we will finally be happy. Only this big heap had to land. Despite his appearances as a wealthy person, he's probably just a thief too! He came to scare us! Eh! But he doesn't scare us, does he? Tomorrow I will tell Lord Lu San, what does it matter what he made us promise! Then I will pay our debts to the boss of the house and we will move; we will see what Li Mubai and this so-called Shi do to us!"

Hearing her mother mention the recommendations her father had given her before he died and also blame her for her conduct with Li Mubai, Xianniang felt like a dagger sank into her delicate chest. She took refuge on her bed to cry bitter tears. She did not think then of hitting the little lacquered pillow with her hand. The dagger inside made a small sound that affected the young woman even more, making her think back to her tragic past.

Xie Xianniang was from Qingjiangpu near Huaiyang City. Her father was called Xie Qi. He practiced martial arts, knew how to recite a few poems and could write several sinograms. He also knew how to perform all kinds of acrobatics and had thus been hired by a wealthy family to entertain the members. Lady Xie was a girl of joy in her youth. She married Xie Qi and gave birth to Xianniang. When Xianniang was seven or eight years old, her father was fired by the wealthy family. He was out of work for some time, and misery set in. Unable to continue like this, he found a way to survive by performing a few tricks and acrobatics in the street. He was able to juggle five sabers without ever letting a single one fall to the ground. He also knew how to swallow a sword and how to do

sleight of hand. He had taught Xianniang to perform the Flower Drum Dance and to sing several popular tunes. They led a wandering existence through different countries, living off their performances, sometimes earning large sums of money.

Ten years passed thus, Xianniang accompanying her father on the roads, enduring many hardships. Despite all this suffering, Xianniang grew up to become a lovely young woman. Xie Qi had managed to raise some money over the years. As he grew older, he no longer wanted to travel through the Jianghu. During a stopover in Henan in the city of Zhumadian, he considered buying a few mu of land and finally putting down his luggage. He did not expect his lovely daughter to catch the eye of the local tyrant, a man named Miao Zhenshan, known as "the Fish that swallows up the Boats", a famous hero of Henan Province. His physical strength was amazing, he used to wield the Pu saber (108) and also knew perfectly well how to swim. He also used darts which hit the mark every time. He had traveled Rivers and Lakes for over thirty years and had never met an adversary of his size. He was over fifty at the time and still traveled very often. Every time he returned from his wanderings, he would come back loaded with gold, and always landed with many beautiful and young women, whom he had obtained somehow. Over the years, he had obtained more than ten qing (109) of cultivable land and had a huge residence built, supporting more than a hundred henchmen and villagers. Against all expectations, he had good relations with the local authorities and had become a kind of gentleman who was called "Sire Miao, the high official". The people who designated him by this honorary title were in fact only the men under his command, because in truth, behind his back, people called him rather "Miao the Tiger". Miao Zhenshan had established his rule over the entire region. He oppressed the villagers and engaged in all kinds of abuses. He was much more terrible than a tiger, and people were no longer in fear, but in hatred.

Miao Zhenshan did not have an official wife, but retained more than twenty young girls obtained during all these years spent wandering in other provinces or forcibly abducted in the region. Although dressed in silk, they were only poor prisoners. Miao Zhenshan was extremely brutal. He was very suspicious and

frequently mistreated young women. If any unusual word or behavior aroused his suspicion, he was ruthless. It was rumored that Miao Zhenshan had had at least forty to fifty wives; there were only about twenty left now. No one really knew how the absent ones died.

Miao Zhenshan found a way to get Xianniang, Xie Qi's daughter, by allowing her parents to settle behind the village and leaving them land to work. The first month, Miao Zhenshan pampered Xianniang. He gave her a set of red satin, some gold jewelry and he did not abuse her in any way. But soon after, his bad temper resurfaced and he found an opportunity to whip her. Xianniang had grown up in Jianghu, she did not give up. She began to sob and retort. Miao Zhenshan, enraged, threw Xianniang to the ground forcing her to kneel down and again used his whip, previously soaked in water. No one dared intervene to calm him down. Xianniang, cruelly beaten, was covered with wounds. Two months later, she still had not recovered. Her parents, Xie Qi, Lady Xie and Xianniang decided to sneak away. Miao Zhenshan quickly noticed this and caught up with them. He ordered the villagers to beat Xie Qi, who almost died there, and whip Lady Xie. As for Xianniang, she received an even more terrible volley of beatings and was locked up for several days. Miao Zhenshan decided not to deliver her until her birthday.

From then on, Xianniang never dared display even a small disrespect; she was only flattering Miao Zhenshan, whose anger gradually subsided. The terrible beatings administered to Xie Qi finally got the better of him, and he succumbed to his injuries a few weeks after their escape. Shortly before his death, Xianniang was able to see him again and he recommended this to her:

"I will die soon, and this is because of Miao Zhenshan. After my death, both of you will have to find a way to escape, otherwise sooner or later he will kill you too! If you can escape, flee to Beijing. Where the Emperor's feet tread the ground, the laws can only be enforced. Our aunt lives in the capital, she is in a brothel. You can very well go there and find work. Subsequently, you will look for an official with whom to marry and who can protect you, otherwise, Miao Zhenshan will come to look for you one day or another!"

Xie Qi passed away. Xianniang at all times continued to flatter Miao Zhenshan and win his affection, while concealing a dagger bequeathed by her father. She was waiting for the opportunity to use it against him. Having thus avenged her father, she would kill herself. Xianniang ultimately never took action. First, she feared the physical strength of Miao Zhenshan, who certainly wouldn't let it go, and second, if she killed herself, her mother would have no one to lean on. For over six months, she endured Miao Zhenshan's humiliations with reluctance. Then, one day, he went to the government of Kaifeng (110) at the invitation of his nephew, Zhang Yujin, nicknamed the Golden Spear.

After she left, Xianniang and her mother fled again, taking a lot of risks. The road was very trying to the capital. They found their aunt Jin there, who lived alone in Beijing. She had started by doing the hair of the prostitutes in the brothels, thus amassing enough money to buy two young girls whom she educated. She later placed them as courtesans in a brothel. She thus earned a lot of money, and was still able to buy a concubine from the south of the city, whom she later recognized as her adopted daughter; it was none other than Lady Xie.

Xianniang and Lady Xie did not dare to tell Aunt Jin that they had fled Henan because of Miao Zhenshan. They only told her that Xie Qi was no longer of this world and that, without resources, they had come to take refuge with her. Aunt Jin immediately noticed the beauty of her niece. She thought that Xianniang was the ideal age to be placed in a brothel. With her charm, she would undoubtedly have great success. Her mother having been a prostitute, she would certainly have no problem with that. So Aunt Jin said this to the two women:

"So don't worry both of you. Don't you think that with her beauty, it will be easy for you to eat your fill and dress appropriately?"

A few days later, Aunt Jin prepared and dressed Xianniang from head to toe and presented her to the Sumptuous Treasures House in Hanjiantan Pleasure Alley.

After these years of leading a wandering life and enduring the blows of fate, Xianniang had become arrogant and melancholy, a

character rather inappropriate for carrying out the activity of a prostitute. But she was so beautiful, with such varied talents, that, despite her somewhat insolent air, many wealthy lords succumbed to her charms. She notably met Fat Lu San, who was convinced that she would please Lord Xu. Fat Lu San presented it to him and thus succeeded in bonding with this powerful and fortunate scholar. Over the next six months, Lord Xu spent several hundred liang of money to spend time with the young woman. Subsequently, Xianniang rescued the two abused girls, whose living conditions reminded her of her own.

Her position having risen, she could easily refuse to keep the clients for the night and strove to make acquaintance with powerful and fortunate lords. It was not that she liked influential dignitaries, but she always dreaded the coming of Miao Zhenshan or his henchmen. She knew he wouldn't give up so easily and that he would find them sooner or later. Beijing was a huge city where local government control was very tight, but Miao Zhenshan was an expert in martial arts and his henchmen were bullies nonetheless. It would have been easy to kill them both. Xianniang constantly felt in danger. It was to face the possible arrival of Miao Zhenshan that she hid her father's dagger; she expected at any time to have to defend herself at the risk of her life. At the same time, she hoped to quickly meet a good and influential lord who could protect her.

Xianniang had been a courtesan for almost a year and now knew several wealthy and powerful officials. Most of them were rude men, who just wanted to pass the time without showing any attachment. Assistant Minister Xu was a wealthy dignitary but always treated Xianniang well. The young woman had repeatedly considered the possibility of a marriage with him. The two women would not only be secure about their future, but above all would be safe from Miao Zhenshan, who would never dare to offend such a powerful lord. Only Lord Xu was very old and already had two concubines, so it was not obvious that he was interested in her. Xianniang was really undecided.

It was then that she met Li Mubai. He was not a civil servant, but he was young and elegant and was extremely kind to her. He did not regard her as a courtesan and held her in high esteem. After



only a few visits, Xianniang succumbed to the tenderness of the young man, who had endured so much suffering and abuse. He occupied all her thoughts. One day without seeing him and it was as if she was losing her soul. Lady Xie had noticed her feelings for the charming young man and this did not make her very happy. But Li Mubai didn't seem stingy, so she didn't dare say anything.

That rainy evening, Xianniang couldn't contain her feelings and kept Li Mubai for the night. After this evening, Li Mubai formulated the wish to marry her. The tender feelings that the young man had for her upset Xianniang, but could not prevent her from thinking about Miao Zhenshan. How could a simple xiucai protect her? If she married him, they would only be together for a short time, as Miao Zhenshan would find her and would certainly kill her. So she gave him no answer and kept all her sadness inside.

The love they had for each other grew stronger and stronger. Xianniang felt tugged and found herself crying many times near her pillow. She finally decided to give up Lord Xu and follow Li Mubai. She had not yet told her mother about this resolution when Li Mubai beat Fat Lu San. She didn't care if he attacked Lu San, but his demeanor and his words reminded her of the brave people of Rivers and Lakes, which saddened her greatly. In her childhood spent accompanying her father on the roads, she had met many individuals from Jianghu, and all without exception had been shown to be evil and violent; and she eventually ran into Miao Zhenshan who had killed her father and abused her for months. Xianniang hated the men of Jianghu the most, fearing to die under their blows. She could never have imagined that Li Mubai, for whom she had such tender feelings, also belonged to this world.

From then on, Xianniang spent her nights crying and grew more and more distant from Li Mubai. But her feelings couldn't dissipate so easily. The day Li Mubai came to say goodbye to her, she reluctantly saw him walk away and promised to wait for him. After his departure, she regretted her words somewhat, saying to herself: "He's leaving, that's it! Why did I need to tell him that? How could I live with a Jianghu man again? It is true that Li Mubai treats me well, but how would I do if, after marrying him, his character as a Jianghu man resurfaces? Besides, he is helpless and leads a

wandering life. I spent all my childhood like this and now roam the brothels, would it be possible that after my marriage I could continue this kind of life? I dare not imagine what anger Miao Zhenshan must have displayed after our flight! If he finds me, even if Li Mubai practices martial arts, he will never defeat Miao Zhenshan."

Xianniang kept thinking and finally understood that she couldn't marry Li Mubai. But she was still full of contradictions, not able to see him go. In recent days, Fat Lu San had become more and more insistent and demanded a response to Lord Xu's request; she never answered him clearly, she remained vague. Her heart swayed, she was torn day and night.

Today, Xianniang learned that Li Mubai had been arrested, and in the face of intimidation and promises from Fat Lu San, she could only accept Lord Xu's proposal. She was grieved over Li Mubai's arrest, however, and thought back to all the days spent in his company. Coming back home now, she came across this stout Shi, who informed her of the fate of his friend who was the victim of a stunt orchestrated by Fat Lu San and Lord Xu, and who claimed that Li Mubai had always been honest and right. Xianniang was in despair.

Faced with the palaver of her mother, who never stopped lecturing her, she took refuge on her bed to cry all the tears in her body. She bumped into the dagger hidden in her pillow, which brought her back to her tragic past. A moment later, she found herself alone in the room, in the pale glow of the lamp. Her mother had probably come downstairs to settle her debts to the manager of the house. In the adjoining rooms you could hear the laughter and chatter of the other girls and their customers. From the ground floor rose a melodious song which said:

Poor young lady, as beautiful as the flower.

Your sad life, as fragile as the leaf.

Talented, you took the trouble,

and now you long for the loved one...

## Chapter 16

*Xu the assistant minister becomes engaged,*

*The concubine takes up residence in the secret residence;*

*The beile Tie, enamored of justice,*

*Rehabilitate the innocent, victim of the ignoble artifice.*

The next day, Xianniang and her mother moved to Gongxing Inn in the Pearl Market District. The hostel belonged to Gros Lu San. The day before, he had had two spacious bedrooms prepared for them. After lunch, the two women received a visit from Aunt Jin. She was quick to congratulate them:

"I heard the news and immediately came to see you. What good fortune, my little one! I have in front of me the wife of a high official! My dear niece, you will have to not forget your aunt later!"

As she spoke, she patted the delicate shoulders of Xianniang, who lowered her head modestly and smiled shyly.

Lady Xie at the height of joy could not be silent:

"Didn't all of this happen because of your kindness? When we got to the capital, if you hadn't been there, how could we have managed and how could we have met Lord Xu? Apparently luck accompanies me in my old age; I will still be able to enjoy it for a few more years! You must really appreciate to see that you didn't help us for nothing! Her poor father," she continued, "could never have imagined such a thing!"

Xianniang suddenly had tears in her eyes.

Aunt Jin shoved Lady Xie a bit:

"But what are you saying? On a day of great rejoicing like this, you talk about your man again, it is not a happy word! You want to spoil the party!"

"You don't know," Lady Xie smiled slightly, "that although the marriage is now concluded, it was not that easy! If Lord Lu San had not helped us, marriage with His Excellency Xu would not have been possible."

Aunt Jin took a seat and started discussing the preparations. Soon after, Aunt Jin slipped away and Fat Lu San accompanied by Lord Xu arrived. Lord Xu, seeing Xianniang so charming, felt himself rejuvenated. Dame Xie began by complaining, telling them about the arrival the night before at the House of Sumptuous Treasures of a man named Shi; she told them about the threats he had made against them. Lord Xu felt cold in his back, all his wrinkles were drawn and he kept frowning.

"How are we going to do this?" He stammered, addressing Gros Lu San.

"If you stop at such a small story," Fat Lu San smiled coldly, "it's the end of everything! How many thugs of his kind are there in the capital? They only think about making some easy money and you would be afraid?"

Lord Xu finally told himself that this matter was not so important and replied:

"Yes, no need to worry, let's take care of what we have to do instead! I have consulted the almanac," he said to Lady Xie, "the day after tomorrow will be a good day. I will pick up Xianniang and we will get married at noon. There isn't much to do, but we still need to think about the preparations a bit, so as not to be caught off guard when the day comes."

He then groped around in his boot and retrieved a small satin bag, from which he took out two hundred liang silver bills which he gave to Lady Xie. Fat Lu San then said:

"Tomorrow I will send you a maid and a servant to help you; we will not come."

Fat Lu San yawned. He would have liked to smoke some opium. He had plenty to smoke in the inn, but he found the bunks

uncomfortable. He said to Lord Xu:

"So stop staring at her like that! You are the husband, no one will be able to steal her from you!"

Xianniang lowered her head and blushed. Dame Xie exclaimed:

"Excellency Xu, don't be so impatient, in a while she will be yours."

This made Lord Xu laugh whose beard began to twitch in all directions.

"Brother," Fat Lu San said to him, "let's go! Let's go to my bank in the West End for a smoke!"

Resigned, Xianniang waited until her wedding day, but worried about Li Mubai. She thought of talking to Lord Xu again after the ceremony and asking him to charge an acquaintance to get him out of prison.

Two days later, in the morning, Lord Xu hired a palanquin and quietly brought Xianniang down the alley in the Field of Maneuvers, to Fat Lu San's second residence. Lady Xie followed behind in a car. Lord Xu had invited ten of his closest friends to the wedding banquet. There were the Imperial Censor Liu, the Imperial Censor Pang, the Sieur Ma, member of the Imperial Academy, the official Wang, of the inner court, Yang Er, in charge of the residence of Duke Qi, Jiao Wu, the steward of one of the princely houses, as well as several rich merchants. Among all these men, Jiao Wu was only an honorable servant of a princely palace. His master exercised his power at the Imperial Court and many were the officials who, wanting to request an audience with His Lordship, had to go through him first. Jiao Wu was thus the only one to have attached importance to his outfit and during the banquet he was the target of mockery from other dignitaries.

Lord Xu was getting married to a courtesan who everyone said was lovely and as beautiful as Chang'e, but Jiao Wu found it hard to believe him. According to him, a prominent and famous courtesan could not marry such an old lord, however fortunate and powerful he may be. When he saw Xianniang getting off the palanquin, he

was stunned. Hey, he thought, is there such a beautiful girl on earth? Lord Xu is really lucky! I regret not having known sooner that there was this kind of beauty in brothels, I would have gone hanging out there!"

Beside him, Censor Pang twisted his beard between his fingers and stared at Xianniang. Jiao Wu, stung with jealousy, pulled the censor Pang aside and said sarcastically:

"The Imperial Government maintains the clique of censors that you are, what for? Lord Xu befriends a girl who can manage as best she can for a living, and not only do you not make any report to the Emperor, but you also attend the wedding!"

"We all have a good relationship," censor Pang blushed, "who could offend Lord Xu for such a small matter?"

"Offend him," replied Jiao Wu, "how much did you and Liu receive from old Xu?"

"But nothing at all," Pang replied, "I couldn't try to extract money from him for so little. On the other hand, I have another story which seems more or less related to this one and which could well in a few days allow me to blackmail Gros Lu San."

Jiao Wu promptly questioned him about this story. Censor Pang then explained to him in a low voice that Fat Lu San had served as an intermediary for Lord Xu's marriage and that he had falsely accused a regular of the young woman, a certain Li Mubai, of being a notorious bandit. Fat Lu San had assigned one of his relations to have him imprisoned in the yamen. Jiao Wu was outraged.

"Fat Lu San, that scumbag, is using imperial law as he pleases?"

This question was intended to irritate the censor Pang so that he thus prevents the marriage between Lord Xu and Xianniang and Jiao Wu then finds a way to get to the young woman.

"We all know each other, sure," Jiao Wu continued, "but they still acted shamelessly and a censor cannot let that go. Otherwise, if the prince found out, you too would suffer the consequences!"

Seeing Jiao Wu's anger, Censor Pang understood that he was inordinately jealous of Lord Xu's marriage to such beauty. If Jiao Wu got angry with them and told the prince about this matter, everyone would suffer and he could also say goodbye to his plan to extort money from Fat Lu San. Censor Pang deeply regretted telling him about it.

Lord Xu then asked Xianniang to come out of his room and come and serve alcohol to all the guests. The young woman had changed and was now wearing a hot pink ensemble. She was even more attractive. As she served him, Jiao Wu felt tingling all over his body, he couldn't stand the fire of his jealousy. After Xianniang returned to her room, he took his leave without waiting for the end of the banquet. Lord Xu and Fat Lu San both noticed his unusual behavior and very respectfully walked him back to the entrance.

Jiao Wu got into the cart and walked to the princely residence with a heart full of jealousy and hatred. We have known each other for several years with Lord Xu, he thought, I shouldn't argue with him over such a small matter. On the other hand, Lord Xu remains the prince's teacher, who, even if he did learn it, couldn't blame him too much. So he had to resign himself. Dejected and full of anger, he brooded all the way and arrived at the palace without noticing it.

As he got out of the car, several men came to meet him. About ten elegantly dressed servants pulled several horses. At their head walked a fine-looking man. Tall, fair skinned, with a small drooping mustache, he was no more than thirty-five. He wore an aubergine-colored robe and a short black jacket with a high collar, a yellow belt at the waist, and officer boots. As soon as he saw him, Jiao Wu recognized Shanhong, the eminent and remarkable Second Lord Tie, a member of the Imperial Family, belonging to the Beile Tie clan, known as "Little Mustaches". Jiao Wu stepped forward to greet him respectfully.

"Lord Tie," he said to him, "it's been a while since I've seen you. Are you going to the palace?"

Young Beile Tie nodded. He usually enjoyed chatting and joking with the steward of the prince's residence.

"I have been here since the day before yesterday," he said smiling, "but I haven't seen you. I have heard that these days you hang out with several dignitaries and high officials, and that you are getting more and more social!"

Jiao Wu couldn't help but blush.

"Lord," he replied, "how would I find the time to deal with my relationships? It is true that I have some knowledge and according to convenience, I have to accept their invitations to different ceremonies, such as weddings and funerals."

Seeing that today Jiao Wu was particularly well dressed, the young beile Tie exclaimed:

"And today, where did you go to fulfill your obligations?"

The Second Lord Tie was someone who especially enjoyed sticking his nose into other people's affairs. Jiao Wu suddenly thought that he had to make the young beile notice his jealousy. So he answered:

"Oh! Don't ask me about it! Old assistant minister Xu found a concubine again. He told me about it a few days ago, and I just went to the wedding to congratulate him. This old Xu does nothing but stupid things, at home he already has two who are in their seventeen, eighteen years old. Today he got together with a girl from the south of the city. It seems that she is a famous courtesan, her name is Cuixian. I saw her and we better call her Celestial Beauty... "

In speaking thus, he thought he had sufficiently shown what was on his mind; he said:

"It wasn't easy for old Xu to get this Cuixian. He had to spend large sums; Fat Lu San helped him. Only Cuixian absolutely did not want to marry him and has long fallen in love with a charming young man, a certain Li Mubai."

The young beile seemed surprised to hear Li Mubai's name mentioned and listened more attentively to Jiao Wu.

"I heard that Li Mubai has awesome strength. He beat up Fat Lu San



one day, and bruised him. Since then, Fat Lu San has had a visceral hatred for him. Both to wreak revenge and to eliminate a rival of Lord Xu, Fat Lu San had him imprisoned by his acquaintances in the yamen prison, and falsely accused him of banditry. You can imagine, Lord Tie, in order to marry this concubine, they had to sentence an innocent person to death, and because they are wealthy and influential, the imperial censors have turned a blind eye to this affair; it is really despicable!"

Young beile Tie looked furious. He asked:

"Are you talking about this Li Mubai who lives south of town? A loner who excels in martial arts? He beat Huang Jibei, Feng Long, the Little Lance, and Feng Mao with his two sabers."

"It seems to me to be him," replied Jiao Wu. "He is a close friend of De the fifth lord in charge at the inner court."

"Yes, it's him," agreed the young Beile Tie. "This brave young man arrived in Beijing recently. If he is the victim of an injustice, I cannot tolerate it. You are going to tell Fat Lu San and Lord Xu that they order their famous acquaintances to release him immediately, otherwise I will not answer for anything!"

"Well, well," replied Jiao Wu, "count on me."

Young Beile Tie was fuming, he finally asked:

"Is the prince at home?"

"I think so," replied Jiao Wu, "I will tell you."

Hurrying to go and warn the prince, Jiao Wu thought: "It really pissed off the young beile. Fat Lu San and Lord Xu had better watch out. But the young beile only spoke of saving Li Mubai and not of separating Lord Xu and his concubine; result, it will still turn to the advantage of old Xu! The beile instructed me to go and see Lord Xu; when I am in front of him, will I really have to repeat all these terrible words to him?" Jiao Wu suddenly felt very happy.

Young beile Tie, preoccupied with this matter concerning Li Mubai, stayed with the prince for a short time and quickly took his leave.

Back home, he was even more pissed off. Recently, he heard more and more often about the fame of Li Mubai; he must have been a brave and remarkable young man. His title of nobility did not allow him to become acquainted with him. Now that he knew that he had been the victim of a slanderous accusation by this vile Lord Xu and this profiteer Lu San, and that he had been thrown in jail, he could not stand idly by. If he did not act, he would not find calm and besides, he would certainly be ridiculed by everyone. So he instructed Delu, one of his devoted servants, to go to the yamen prison to visit Li Mubai. He gave him some money and gave him many recommendations. He also confided in him a note addressed to His Excellency Governor Mao, asking him to come to his house this evening to discuss a matter.

The individuals detained at the Yamen Prison were all notorious Jianghu brigands or criminals from the capital, and it was very difficult for them to speak with outsiders. When Delu introduced himself and explained that it was the young beile Tie who was sending him, the official in charge of the prison jumped up in his seat and exclaimed:

"Ho! Good! You are therefore dispatched by his lordship the beile Tie. Who do you see, I will immediately send someone to look for him!"

Delu put on great airs and took out thirty liang of silver.

"My master the beile Tie told me to tell you that ten liang are coming back to you, you will all go for a drink."

"Aïya! Why does His Lordship the beile reward us?" exclaimed the head of the prison. "If he has to tell us something, don't be shy!"

"The young beile wants you to use the remaining twenty liang to prepare meals for Li Mubai. Li Mubai is someone the beile particularly appreciates, and he forbids you to mistreat him."

"But we would never dare," replied the manager, "Li Mubai is someone who behaves well. Moreover, his case has not yet been clearly examined, and he has arguably been accused unfairly! Maybe in a few days he will be released. If now the beile protects

him, we will dare to mistreat him all the less."

Delu nodded in approval, then begged the manager to take him to Li Mubai.

Li Mubai had been locked in the same cell as around ten death row inmates for several days. The prison official had him transferred to another, cleaner cell. Delu spoke to Li Mubai through the bars.

Li Mubai was arrested a few days ago and appeared in court twice. Not only did he fiercely deny being involved in any theft affair, he spoke more clearly of revenge on the part of Fat Lu San. Li Mubai explained that he was an honest person and that officials should not take money from Gros Lu San to accuse an innocent man of robbery. The magistrates had had him administer several volleys of beatings with a stick. Li Mubai was bruised all over. He was put on additional chains and had to endure the mistreatment of the guards. His suffering was truly unbearable.

In recent days, apart from Shi the Fat, who had sent his employee to bribe the guards so that he could see him once, no one had come to visit him. Li Mubai hoped that De Xiaofeng would come back quickly and get him out of there. Now facing Delu, accompanied by one of the officials in charge of the prison, he wondered who had sent him.

Through the bars, Delu bowed to Li Mubai and said:

"It's the young beile, the second Lord Tie who sent me. My master knows that Lord Li is the victim of an injustice in this matter and sends me to tell you not to worry anymore! This evening, my master invited the governor to his home to discuss your trial. It is very likely that you will be released in a few days!"

Li Mubai was stunned. He had heard of the Beile Tie clan before, but didn't really know who this Second Lord was. He questioned:

"Have I ever had the honor of meeting your master?"

"No," Delu replied, "but he heard of your fame. My master's name is Tie Shanhong, but he is known as Tie the Second Lord, the Little

Mustaches."

Li Mubai suddenly remembered that De Xiaofeng had mentioned this great name once. Little Mustaches was part of the royal family; Li Mubai had never seen him before. Today, he was helping him graciously. He seemed to be a man of justice and merit. Li Mubai sighed deeply:

"Thank your master very much for taking care of me in this way. Tell him that Li Mubai is a xiucai from Nangong. I arrived in the capital to live with a relative and find work. I am a frank and upright person who respects the laws. I once beat up Fat Lu San, that vile merchant, and in revenge, he instructed his acquaintances to throw me in prison and accuse me of robbery. There is no evidence against me and I was beaten to confess, to no avail. If the beile can plead my innocence and get me released, I will be indebted all my life to his greatness of soul for this benefit. I don't need to go into details, but even though I've never met him, I can clearly see that young beile Tie is a loyal person. You tell him. Let him trust his heart. If he can save me and get me out, I will go and thank him personally; if he does not succeed, I will die here but I will never forget this friend!"

Delu promised him and asked if there was anything he could do for him outside.

"My knowledge is few," Li Mubai replied, "and I don't need anything, thank you."

Delu nodded and took his leave.

Li Mubai was reassured. Thanks to the intervention of young Beile Tie, the prison officials and guards were particularly kind to him. He knew they feared him. If the beile managed to get him out of here, Li Mubai would go and thank him personally, then he would immediately leave Beijing, without even going to say hello to his uncle.

The next day, Fat Shi's employee didn't even have to bribe the guards to see him. He had brought him a box of food. He tells him:

"Lord Li, how come they moved you to this cell? You are much better here!"

"It's still a cell," smiles Li Mubai, "I'm not any freer!"

The waiter opened the box, revealing dishes, a pitcher of alcohol, and rolls.

"The boss said to himself that you certainly wanted to eat the house specialties, and he prepared two kinds of dishes for you which he asked me to bring to you."

"He's doing too much for me, I'm really embarrassed," Li Mubai sincerely thanked him.

"Do not be embarrassed, you are a friend of the boss! You are also an old customer, you have had trouble, and it is normal that we come to visit you."

Li Mubai sighed softly. He picked up the dishes and the jug through the bars. The guards were not very vigilant and did not watch over him specially. The employee then whispered to him:

"Wait until you are alone to eat the bulk of the mantou!"

Li Mubai was intrigued. He hastily finished eating and drinking; he only had two buns left. One of them was indeed a little bigger than the other. He slid the dishes and the jug on the other side of the bars and the servant left the place.

Li Mubai, confused, waited until he saw no one through the opening of the bars before secretly breaking the mantou. He discovered half a file inside. Baffled, he quickly took the file out of the bun, hid it in his rice straw bunk on the floor, and sat on it. Shi the Fat is really daring, he thought. He dared to hide this file in one of the buns so that I would get rid of my chains and be able to escape the prison. Perhaps he thinks that if I manage to remove these shackles, it will be a piece of cake for me to escape... Only, if I escape I will be a criminal on the run and I will never be able to be acquitted; I would have to hide and not appear in public anymore, not to mention the harm I would do to my uncle. Li Mubai smirked as he

thought about it all, but he gave up following Shi's plans. He even began to suspect him again; was his friend really just an ordinary trader?

He put the file aside. Li Mubai was beginning to find the time long; he thought back to Xianniang, so fragile when she cried and so beautiful when she smiled. He was suddenly grabbed by the memory of Xiulian and assailed with grief. He then put his two hands on his legs and thus remained tormented. He came to prefer to stay locked in this prison than to suffer hopelessly outside.

In prison, the days were very short. The sun had not yet set when his cell was already plunged into darkness. A guard came to bring him food. After the meal, night fell for good. In the prison yard, the sound of chains was heard; Were they condemned to death those who were brought before the magistrates to be questioned? Li Mubai suddenly thought, "If the young beile's interview is unsuccessful and Fat Lu San spends more money, sooner or later I will be sentenced to death. Could it be that the dignified young man that I am die so unjustly?" Li Mubai thought again of the file hidden in the straw. As he was about to take it out to free himself, a noble thought crossed him and stopped his gesture. Li Mubai exhaled long sighs and lay down on the layer of straw. Mosquitoes swirled around his face and legs, stinging relentlessly; he paid no attention to it. Tormented and melancholy, he fell sound asleep.

Without knowing how long he had dozed off, he suddenly felt someone shake him. Li Mubai jumped up and immediately sat up on the layer of straw. Opening his eyes, he distinguished in the semi-darkness of the cell a shadow which leaned towards him and whispered to him:

"Let's go!"

While addressing Li Mubai, he unbuckled his chains. The stunned young man energetically pushed back the liberating hand and exclaimed furiously:

"I will not go. If I wanted to run away, I wouldn't have waited for you to come and save me!"

The shadow straightened; he kept panting.

"Who are you?" Li Mubai finally asked him.

The person did not answer him. Li Mubai was going to sit up. Lest he grab him, the shadow hurried to open the door and leap out of the cell. Li Mubai thought it was a strange dream. But the shadow was still there.

"Hurry up a bit!" he said through the bars.

"Don't worry about me," Li Mubai got angry. "I don't want to escape, hurry up and close that door instead!"

He heard a sigh and the door closed. With a thud and a faint click of tiles, the visitor climbed onto the roof and slipped away. Li Mubai, still agitated, ends up going back to bed.

The next day, the young beile Tie did not send him anybody, and Shi's employee did not bring him food. The guards also did not come looking for him to appear on trial. Li Mubai was most despondent.

The next day De Xiaofeng, the Iron Hand, came to see him.

"Brother De," Li Mubai exclaimed, "when did you get back?"

"Yesterday," he replied with a very concerned air. "I learned what happened to you and hurried to come see you today. Brother, don't worry! This case will not lead to a conviction. The young beile goes to great lengths for you. I heard the governor promised to question you again. If he no longer has any suspicion about you, then he will set you free."

"What suspicions?" asked Li Mubai. "It has been several days since they interviewed me. It's humiliating and insulting to leave me like this, without deciding my fate."

"Brother," said De Xiaofeng frowning, "now you better contain your anger! In my opinion, the governor made the decision to release you; only, he must keep you under arrest for a few more days, otherwise he will lose face. I also heard that he owed the banks of

Gros Lu San twenty to thirty thousand liang of money and that Gros Lu San had paid several thousand liang to his acquaintances for your arrest."

"Could it be possible that he is afraid of Fat Lu San?" Li Mubai said sorry.

"If you only knew," replied De Xiaofeng with a sigh, "Fat Lu San is certainly a merchant, but his power and influence are much greater than that of a prince or a marquess! I warn you, some high dignitaries would sell their titles and their honor to be able to deal with Gros Lu San, and there is nothing we can do about it!"

Li Mubai had turned red upon hearing this. "If I get out of here," he said to himself, "I must kill this Fat Lu San!" De Xiaofeng continued:

"Currently, in the inner courtyard, we are really overwhelmed. I come back from Dongling and I understand that they want to send me back on a mission to Rehe (111), so I must quickly find a way so that you can get out of prison within two or three days, before I'm leaving."

"Brother," replied Li Mubai, "do not delay your mission for me."

"Brother," sighed De Xiaofeng, "we haven't known each other for a long time, but I really consider you my own brother. You're in prison, how can I leave with peace of mind? It's been a while since I've been here talking to you," he continued, "I must now go to the Beile Tie clan, to the second lord."

"When you see him, tell him my infinite gratitude."

"I will tell him. The Second Lord Tie is a most respected man. If he's on your side, you won't be behind bars for long. Be quiet!"

After that, De Xiaofeng left him.

De Xiaofeng got out of the prison and was escorted back by one of the officials, who said to him while bowing:

"You're leaving already?"



"I surrender to the Beile Tie clan."

"If you see the Second Lord Tie, could you tell him from us that Li Mubai will not be the victim of injustice? It's always better to be outside than to sleep in jail, but there's no other way right now."

"I know," replied De Xiaofeng, "take good care of him!"

De Xiaofeng then got into the cart and begged Fuzi to go to the Anding Gate, to the Beile Clan Palace.

De Xiaofeng noticed that a cart was stopped in front of the entrance to the palace. He recognized Huang Jibei's personal vehicle, the Lean Buddha Amida. It intrigued him. De Xiaofeng entered. Two servants came to greet him respectfully and said cordially:

"Lord De, it has been a long time since we last saw you."

"I was gone on a mission," he replied.

"Huang the fourth lord is here," said one of the servants, "he is talking with the second lord Tie in the reception hall."

"You can go and tell me," said De Xiaofeng, "I know Huang the fourth lord."

The servants guided De Xiaofeng through two spacious courtyards and came to the front of the hall. De Xiaofeng waited under the corridor for the servants to warn the young beile Tie; shortly after, they returned to seek him to beg him to enter.

De Xiaofeng began by paying his respects to the young beile, then he and Huang Jibei greeted each other. The young beile smiled and very kindly asked De Xiaofeng to take a seat on a round stool. A young servant brought tea and Lord Tie asked him when he had returned. De Xiaofeng straightened up and replied:

"I walked through the city gates last night at five o'clock."

Huang Jibei pretended to smile.

"De the Fifth Lord's missions are always a success!"

"Hey! Why talk about success," replied De Xiaofeng, "I am only very busy!"

"Did you go to the yamen to see Li Mubai?" Asked the young beile.

De Xiaofeng not finding it correct to say that he was coming back from it now replied:

"I think I'll go see him in a moment."

"I just talked to Jibei about it," the young beile said, nodding in his direction. "I never met this young Li Mubai, but heard about his impressive martial arts skill. It seems that he was the victim of a scheme by Gros Lu San and Lord Xu, who allegedly asked an acquaintance to have him imprisoned in the yamen. I sent for His Excellency Mao, the governor. This old Mao is a very smart person, and he clearly denied being solicited by Fat Lu San. He says he actually suspects Li Mubai of being a notorious thief, but that the evidence against him is insufficient so far. He will question Li Mubai again in a few days; if no one else comes to denounce him, he can release him. I then gave him until the middle of the month to release him. However, Jibei just told me a moment ago that Li Mubai is indeed a well-known bandit from the south of Zhili province and that, unable to stay there any longer, he was forced to flee to the capital. If this is really the case, I no longer want to interfere in this business!"

De Xiaofeng looked terrified and changed his expression. He replied immediately:

"These are just rumors. Li Mubai is a xiucai from Nangong, he has a relative, an uncle named Qi Dianchen, who is in the Ministry of Punishment. Li Mubai does not come out of nowhere, I vouch for him!"

De Xiaofeng looked at Huang Jibei with fury; the latter replied with a small smile:

"Xiaofeng, you shouldn't make such a light statement in front of the Second Lord! I know how you met Li Mubai and what friendship binds you both. You are a competent civil servant, you have a

family; it is really not worth the trouble that because of one man you are involved in a business and your family ends up ruined and dispersed! In fact, this case does not concern me absolutely, but we know each other well and I have to warn you!"

"I did indeed meet Li Mubai recently," said De Xiaofeng icily, "but I definitely vouch for him and his actions. Apart from the fact that he is proud and arrogant and that you should not look for him because he can provoke more than one, he absolutely never broke the laws. I am not afraid of compromising myself and I dare to vouch for him; this case is just an injustice!"

"If it's like that," said Huang Jibei coldly, "I ask the second lord to be a witness, and if anything happens to you, you must not come and complain and say that your friends did not warn you!"

De Xiaofeng flinched and thought, "Isn't Huang Jibei clearly threatening me? What scheme is he going to use against me?" De Xiaofeng worked in the inner courtyard, he knew a few influential people, and his family could be said to be relatively well off. Because he was quite gifted in the practice of tieshazhang (112), and was of a sociable and generous nature, he had acquired a certain reputation. But if he had to fight against Huang Jibei, he knew full well that he was no match for it. Frightened, he therefore avoided responding.

The young beile understood very well what was happening and tried to appease them:

"Xiaofeng is worried about his friend, Jibei is afraid that Xiaofeng will be compromised; you both have good intentions, what's the point of getting carried away?"

"The second lord is telling the truth," Huang Jibei smiles bitterly. "I have the impression that Xiaofeng thinks that I wish Li Mubai's death sentence. To tell the truth, I don't know him more than that!"

De Xiaofeng hastened to calmly clarify the situation with Huang Jibei who ended up declaring coldly:

"Good! The case is closed! Let's stop talking about it!"

De Xiaofeng then began to chat with the young beile. Huang Jibei, who seemed bored, quickly took his leave.

After his departure, De Xiaofeng again pleaded in favor of Li Mubai and asserted to the young beile that he was an honest man, and a victim of the infamy of Fat Lu San. Magnanimous, the young beile replied with a smile:

"You don't need to convince me. I'll tell you, I didn't wait for your return to act. I'm not going to let this bunch of scoundrels wrongly accuse an innocent man and sentence him to death!"

Hearing these words, De Xiaofeng felt relieved and reassured.

"I know everything in this matter," continued the young beile, annoyed. "Li Mubai beat up Huang Jibei and Fat Lu San, he is also a close friend of a courtesan whom Lord Xu coveted. These three therefore agreed to pay out a large sum and ask their acquaintances to put Li Mubai in this desperate situation. Only they heard that I was showing interest in this matter, so Huang Jibei came to visit me today to advise me not to deal with it. If I was impulsive, I would immediately send a cart to pick up Li Mubai in prison and have him brought back here; who could stop me?"

At that moment, De Xiaofeng was dying for the young beile to really do it.

"But I don't want anyone to blame me for abusing my power and acting without faith or law. Li Mubai is young. If he stays in jail for a few more days, it's not a big deal, and then maybe it will tone down his arrogance a bit. In a few days, I will release him, and it will be a fair and honorable release!"

De Xiaofeng was fully reassured and warmly thanked the young beile. After a while he took his leave and left the palace.

De Xiaofeng returned to the yamen prison to inform his friend of everything the young beile had said and also to reassure him. Lest Li Mubai get too angry, he preferred to keep quiet about the fact that Huang Jibei was also involved in his arrest. After comforting his friend, Xiaofeng returned home.

As his cart passed the door of his house, a servant came to meet him:

"Master," he said to him, "two men passed by, they were looking for you. I told them you were gone and they said they would come back later."

"You didn't ask them their name, or what they wanted from me?"

"They didn't say why they wanted to see you," answered the servant. But they both said their name was Feng and they were from the Chunyuan Escort Agency in Damochang District."

De Xiaofeng suddenly looked terrified. He returned to his rooms, his heart pounding. He drank a bowl of tea and began to think, "It goes without saying that the two men who wanted to see me today can only be Feng Mao, the Golden Sabers, and Feng Long, the Little Lance. Feng Mao couldn't bear to be defeated by Li Mubai. Now that he's in prison, they fear nothing and come looking for me for revenge! How could my kung fu get to the end of this Feng Mao? De Xiaofeng was sweating and kept frowning. He suddenly thought, "Li Mubai has been a prisoner for several days now, why have they come precisely today?" After thinking for a moment, he understood, "It is for sure Huang Jibei and Fat Lu San who sent them. Here I am back and these two are afraid that I will rescue Li Mubai. So they took care of going to see the young Beile Tie and advising him not to get involved in this affair, then they called on Feng Mao to take care of my case. The schemes of these two are truly despicable! Li Mubai shouldn't have offended them! Fortunately, the young Beile, a man in love with justice, presented himself and came to his aid; it is certain that if it had been someone else, however strong his outrage, he could not have helped Li Mubai. Should we really be afraid of what Huang Jibei insinuated earlier? In appearance, Huang Jibei is like a Buddha, but behind our back he is capable of anything."

De Xiaofeng, deep in thought, had goose bumps. He called on Shou'er to order the servants at the door to categorically deny entry to all who wished to see him, saying that he had been away for the evening, with the exception, however, of his closest friends and acquaintances. Shou'er did so. He told himself that his master

needed a few days of rest after his trip to Dongling and that was why he refused to receive visitors. However, he found his behavior quite strange and dared not ask him anything. In the evening, when he served him dinner, he noticed that the chopsticks he had in his hand kept shaking.

The meal was not finished when a servant suddenly entered. He looked upset and said:

"Master, I come to tell you that the two men calling themselves Feng have just returned. I told them you weren't there, but they didn't believe me and reacted brutally, insisting for a long time to come in, before finally leaving the place."

De Xiaofeng, this time terrified, lost his appetite. He asked:

"Didn't they say when they would come back?"

"No," the servant replied, "and they probably won't come back."

"Did you notice if they were armed?"

"The two men had no weapons with them," he replied, worried by the strange question from his master. "They were empty handed."

De Xiaofeng told himself that they had not come alone and that other men were stationed not far away, with their swords and spears. De Xiaofeng addressed the servant:

"Good! Whoever shows up, you will say that I am not there! If they get angry, you contain your anger and you don't mind two! I'm just home and I need to rest for a few days; I really don't have time to talk to anyone."

The servant bowed several times and returned.

## Chapter 17

*To temporarily avoid any battle,*

*De Xiaofeng slipped north, beyond the Great Wall;*

*They plot in secret and decide to send*

*Mao-the-Sixth lead the Storm and the Tides to them.*

After the meal, De Xiaofeng retired to his room. While smoking he said:

"These missions are sometimes really annoying; I have barely returned from Dongling when I already have to leave for Rehe in a few days!"

"Didn't you say this morning that the trip to Rehe was not the most urgent," replied his wife, "and that it was not yet certain that it was you they were sending?"

"Yes," replied De Xiaofeng, "I was told that yesterday, but it has changed again today. It will undoubtedly be me who will leave and it will have to be within a few days. Basically, these missions outside of Beijing offer a lot of advantages and all the others are vying for them, only me, I would prefer not to leave. There aren't enough of us at home, I'm not at ease when I go!"

"Come on," replied his wife, "every time you leave the house, we close the door. We then spend peaceful and quiet days! As soon as you are there, whether it is Li Mubai, or that seventh marquis, or even your Huang-the-Sixth (113)... everyone comes to see you all day long. As soon as you leave, we don't even see the shadow of your friends anymore."

"To hear you," replied De Xiaofeng, laughing, "I had better not be here!"

De Xiaofeng had just made a decision: in a few days, he would leave Beijing, which would prevent him from crossing paths with

Huang Jibei or Feng Mao. His wife had no idea what he was thinking, but she knew that if his missions were successful, the honors would also fall on her.

In the evening, De Xiaofeng feared that Feng Mao would come back by surprise to look for him at his home and carefully closed the doors. He did not sleep all night; luckily nothing happened. The next day, he would have liked to remain cloistered all day, but business awaited him in the inner courtyard. He had to do violence to himself to go to work. After his toilet, he put on his official clothes. As usual, Fuzi had already prepared the car. De Xiaofeng left the house, accompanied by his servant Shou'er.

The rays of the sun were already appearing. The morning breeze seemed to herald autumn. The mule-drawn cart pulled through Red Fish Lane and rolled into the main street leading to Donghua Gate. On the avenue, he didn't expect a vehicle to come up to him and someone to call out to him:

"Lord De, stop for a moment, I have to talk to you!"

Fuzi recognized Tong San, a small official who worked at the treasury store, and stopped the car. Shou'er came down; De Xiaofeng, meanwhile, just stuck his head out.

"What is it, Lord Tong San?"

Tong San looked distraught. He stepped forward and said in a low voice to De Xiaofeng:

"Fifth Lord De, take a detour and go through the Shenwu Gate (114) instead! Huang Jibei sent Liu-the-Ninth known as "Spotted Falcon", Jiang-the-Third with the "Iron Neck" and other local thugs and scoundrels to wait for you with whips at the Donghua Gate!"

De Xiaofeng was panicked but didn't want Tong San to notice. He got angry and said:

"Well, they dare to come get me, I'll show them what I'm capable of!"

He then asks Fuzi to find this bunch of scoundrels. Tong San



stopped them.

"Lord De," he advised him, "you shouldn't be playing this! You are very good at tieshazhang, but there are too many of them, you will not be able to do it on your own. And above all, if one of them hits you in the face, you will no longer be able to go on a mission!"

De Xiaofeng was cursing in the car, but he ultimately found the idea preferable. He says:

"Alright, let's take a detour through the Shenwu Gate! Thanks, Tong San!"

Shou'er sat back down on the cart, the curtain of the cart fell and they turned around towards the previous door, the Shenwu door. De Xiaofeng soon arrived at the inner courtyard. He began by seeing his superior and asked him to entrust him with the mission for Rehe. The magistrate answered him:

"Xiaofeng, you just came back from Dongling, you must be exhausted, I will give this job to someone else instead!"

"I don't want to fight for this mission, but I have a close friend in Yanqing who is in trouble over his rents. If you give it to me, I will leave for Rehe tomorrow, then I will go to Yanqing. That way, in a month, I will have settled official affairs and my personal affairs."

The magistrate entrusted him with the mission and agreed to settle his case in the process. His journey to Rehe completed, he would still have in his possession at least several hundred liang of silver. The other colleagues found it unfair that he should be appointed again, and the magistrate said to him in private:

"Xiaofeng, your family is wealthy, with you I am not afraid that the mission money will be stolen!"

De Xiaofeng collected the official documents and then went to the stables to choose two sturdy horses; he asked that they be taken to his house in the evening. He had made the decision to leave the next day and thus leave Li Mubai's fate in the hands of the young beile. He visited him to warn him of his departure, but the beile

was already talking to two noble lords. De Xiaofeng instructed a servant to tell him that he was going on a mission for Rehe and that he had come to say goodbye to him. The servant returned shortly after and said to him:

"The Second Lord Tie cannot receive you today. He charges me to tell you that he saw the governor yesterday, who promised him to release Li Mubai in four to five days."

De Xiaofeng was delighted and left the palace. He went to the prison to see Li Mubai and tell him about this news. Li Mubai nodded:

"I already know about it," he told him. "This morning, he sent someone to inform me to reassure me."

"The second lord takes really good care of you," sighed De Xiaofeng, "later you will have to remember everything he has done for you! Brother, we are very, very close. Today my superior instructed me to go to Rehe, I will leave tomorrow!"

Li Mubai seemed to sympathize.

"Brother," he said to him, "if you have to go, don't be late. I'll be out of prison soon, by then don't think about me!"

De Xiaofeng did not want to tell Li Mubai that he was leaving in a hurry because of Huang Jibei and the Feng brothers, otherwise he would inevitably go to find them when he got out of prison. De Xiaofeng sighed:

"Brother, when you are released, go thank young Beile Tie and avoid staying in Beijing too long. Once my mission is accomplished, I decided to go through Yanqing to see my friend Yang Jiantang, nicknamed the Divine Lance, from the Quanxing escort agency. When he was still in Beijing, the two of us were very close and always hung out together."

Li Mubai couldn't help but think back to the convoy he had encountered at Juyong Pass not long before and exclaimed:

"This Yang Jiantang, I know him!"

"I think he certainly heard from you too," De Xiaofeng replied. "It would be best if you could join me there after you get out of prison. I'll still need your help!"

"Well," agreed Li Mubai, "count on me to get there!"

The two men parted thus. De Xiaofeng handed over several liang of silver to one of the prison officials and went home, never to come out for the afternoon. Shortly after, he received the two horses and instructed his servants to lead them to the stables. None of the Feng brothers showed up all day, but on an outing outside the house, Shou'er said he saw Liu-the-Ninth, Spotted Falcon, accompanied by several thugs roaming the alley.

"Don't mind them!" De Xiaofeng said coldly.

De Xiaofeng was not afraid of them; he said to himself: "Huang Jibei, these last days, you made me panic! Wait a little while I go to Yanqing to look for Yang Jiantang, the Divine Lance; and if Li Mubai joins us when he is released from prison, we will find a way to face you!" De Xiaofeng spent the night on his guard.

The next day, at dawn, he finished packing his luggage, provided himself with a simple sword and begged Shou'er to prepare the two horses. He then advised his wife and all his servants to go out as little as possible and to be on their guard. He would definitely be back within a month. Shou'er accompanied him, they both left the house and walked along the main road. Along the way, De Xiaofeng met several of his acquaintances, he greeted them from his horse and was not very talkative.

Soon after, they passed the Desheng Gate. De Xiaofeng was light-hearted, he said to Shou'er:

"I've never been very far with you. This time I'm taking you to toughen up beyond the Great Wall. The saying goes: "It is nice to spend a thousand days at home and hard to spend only a moment outside" But people accustomed to wandering in Rivers and Lakes do not perceive problems the same way. Do you know why when I got back from Dongling I wanted to leave immediately for Rehe? Well, that's because lately Huang Jibei is opposing me. It would

have been pointless to quarrel with him at Peking; now that we are outside the capital, I no longer fear anyone. If he can catch up with us, I will beat him and then we will continue on our way. If he beats us, we will get up and fight again; who is afraid of whom? Shou'er, on the road, you have to learn to be smart, you have to know not to make a mountain of the slightest difficulty. Did you notice that I had taken a blade? If men, even a dozen, were to block our way, that would not stop us!"

De Xiaofeng looked triumphant and redoubled his courage. Shou'er was not really reassured and expected something to happen to them along the way.

After walking four or five li, they found themselves facing ruined ramparts. These were the remains of the ancient city then called Youzhou in the Liao era; they were completely destroyed now and overgrown. They had to bypass the remains of the ramparts to the west to retrieve the road that leads to the north. As they walked past the ruins, people suddenly threw pieces of brick and stones at them. De Xiaofeng was very surprised and quickly stepped aside, squeezing his horse. Shou'er received a stone on his head that could have split his skull if he hadn't worn a hat, and jumped off his horse.

Several individuals then tumbled down, shirtless, shirts over their shoulders, all armed with sabers or sticks. They had evil eyes and seemed to want to engage in combat. De Xiaofeng dismounted and drew out his steel sword. He thought he was dealing with Feng Mao and his gang. He knew he wouldn't be able to beat them, but it was happening so suddenly that he couldn't avoid the confrontation. Glancing over, De Xiaofeng noticed that at their head was this notorious scoundrel from northeast Beijing, Liu-the-Ninth, said Spotted Falcon. He immediately felt reassured and laughed in his heart: "Huang Jibei, if you had appealed to Feng Mao to make me bite the dust, I would indeed have been afraid, but you send me these few local bullies of nothing! Do you really think they could hurt me, Iron Hand?" De Xiaofeng immediately raised his sword and stepped forward. He fumed:

"Liu-the-Ninth, do you really want to die?"

Liu-the-Ninth could count on his strength and on his knowledge of kung fu, as well as on the ten men who accompanied him; but how could De Xiaofeng be impressed by it? Liu came forward looking fierce, a three-part flail (115) in his hand and said to him:

"De, in a few moments you will fall under our blows; how dare you? Take a look around you! There is nobody. We are going to kill you and no one will come and cry foul."

"Fool," replied De Xiaofeng, "you want to pass for brigands? I am on an official mission, under the order of the interior court; if you steal from me, you steal an official mission. Do you know what it costs to attack a government mission? If you have nothing in your head, then come closer! Me, De, I am absolutely not afraid of you!"

Liu-the-Ninth was taken aback when he heard about the mission, and it even seemed to terrify the other ten. They mutually questioned each other. Shou'er gathered his courage. He took De Xiaofeng by the arm and said:

"Lord, it's not worth getting angry with them, let's get back on our horses and get the authorities!"

At these words, the men grew paler and paler. One of them, a man named Zhang-the-Sixth, came forward and respectfully greeted De Xiaofeng and then begged him:

"Fifth Lord De, I beg you, forgive us! We really didn't want you to get angry, it was Huang the Fourth Lord, Skinny Buddha Amida, who sent us!"

"Huang Jibei knew very well that I was on an official mission," growled De Xiaofeng. "By coming to rob me, sabers and sticks in hand, you behave like bandits; I will indeed go and find the authorities to arrest you and cut your head off. I don't think Huang Jibei will take your place!"

"Fifth Lord De," Zhang-the-Sixth replied reverently, "you don't know all the advantages that Huang the Fourth Lord offers us. If we have no more money, he gives us money; if we have nothing more to eat, he gives us food to eat; if one of our parents dies, he provides us

with a coffin; for weddings and births, it's still his money. Now he asks us to settle a small matter for him, even if we risk our life, how could we refuse?"

"Huang Jibei has always done good and always gave alms," said De Xiaofeng coldly, "in fact, he buys you so that when the time comes you do what he wants! I see you really are poor wretches! I don't care about you anymore, run off and go tell Huang Jibei that in fact I don't go specifically to Rehe, that I mostly go to Yanqing, and that he can come and find me there, if he dares!"

Having said that, De Xiaofeng begged Shou'er to get his mount back. He put his saber in its scabbard and mounted his horse. He turned once more to Liu-the-Ninth, Zhang-the-Sixth and the others and shouted at them:

"Hurry up and get out!"

De Xiaofeng, triumphant, followed by Shou'er, resumed his journey in a northbound direction.

The ten scoundrels, stick on their shoulder or saber in hand, looking utterly dejected, returned to the capital. Zhang-the-Sixth then attacked Liu-the-Ninth:

"You shouldn't have chosen to wait for him here to scare him, we really look like looters! Luckily, they spared us; he could have accused us and we would have been chained to Caishikou, where our heads would have been cut off!"

"Yes, he's right," replied one of the other men, "besides De Xiaofeng is a big name from the east of the city, who would dare to rub shoulders with him! When Huang the Fourth Lord asked us this, we should never have accepted!"

Liu-the-Ninth originally thought this trap was a good idea. Now everyone was mad at him and he was starting to regret it. Stomping with anger, he sighed:

"Hey! My brethren, today I have acted foolishly in involving you in this trap. But I swear to you that if I had known that De Xiaofeng

was on an official mission, Lord Huang could have promised me accommodation or even a wife, I would never have dared to go!"

They all laughed. The band passed the Anding Gate. Liu-the-Ninth left his companions in a tea house, the time to go alone to the Beixin Bridge, to Huang Jibei's, to explain to him what had happened. The servants asked him to wait in the hall, behind the screen wall (116).

Soon after, Hao San, known as "Ox Head," the steward of Huang Jibei's residence, came to meet him and, while leading him into a room, asked him if De Xiaofeng had enjoyed his beating. Liu-the-Ninth felt bad; he respectfully greeted Hao San saying:

"Uncle, Lord Huang will have to be told that I will do whatever he wants, but if he wants me to hit De Xiaofeng, he will have to start with me first. I don't want to take care of it anymore. I gathered about ten men, we stationed ourselves on the ruins of the ancient city, beyond the Desheng gate, to wait for De Xiaofeng. He was absolutely not intimidated and told us that he was on an official mission. He accused us of being robbers who were waiting for him to loot him and was about to call the authorities. Hey! He told us again that we were unable to defeat him, even ten against him, and that if the authorities arrested us, our skin was probably worth a little more than money! We therefore preferred not to offend him and to stay alive."

Hao San, furious, growled:

"You are really only good for nothing!"

"You can insult us as much as you want," answered Liu, "that will not prevent that we went there anyway. I mobilized about ten men who got up at dawn to go and wait for De Xiaofeng outside the city; we hung around for a while, it was really not easy. Now they are all waiting for me in a tea house. You have to reward us a little, that I at least invite them to eat noodles with soft meat (117)!"

"You did not do what we asked you to do," Hao San scolded, "and you still dare to ask me for a reward. You really are not afraid of losing face!"

Hao San pushed Liu outside and said sternly:

"Get out! From now on, Huang the Fourth Lord will no longer need your services!"

Liu-the-Ninth's head nearly hit the wall. Angry, he grimaced; he was about to rebel. At that moment, one of the servants announced Huang Jibei's exit. Hao San looked through the window and saw his master, the Lean Buddha Amida followed by the young servant Shunzi. Huang Jibei walked around looking great. Hao San immediately went to meet him and whispered a few words in his ear. Liu-the-Ninth had been honest with Hao San and he was worried that Hao San would report some nasty things to his master. Huang Jibei didn't look the least bit flustered, but rather surprised. He then approached the door to the room. Liu-the-Ninth stepped forward and greeted him respectfully. He was about to say a few honeyed sentences, but Huang Jibei cut him short.

"No need to talk, I know everything. Did De Xiaofeng know that it was I who sent you?"

"He did!" Liu replied, frowning. "He even instructed me to tell you that if you had the courage, you could pick him up in Yanqing!"

Huang Jibei showed some signs of annoyance but didn't respond. He took out a note and handed it to Liu-the-Ninth, saying:

"Go drink your tea!"

Liu accepted the money, slightly embarrassed, and replied:

"Lord Huang, we didn't do what you asked us to do, you reward us anyway..."

Huang Jibei did not wait until the end of his sentence to turn around and leave the room. A cart was already waiting for him outside. He went up, still accompanied by his young servant Shunzi, and announced that he was going to the yamen.

In the car, Huang Jibei kept sighing. "From Xiaofeng," he said to himself, "you really are a bluffer, with the pretext of this official mission you were able to escape from Beijing. I know for a fact that



you cannot provoke me in the capital, so you slip away in Yanqing to ask Yang Jiantang for help and gang up on me; do you really think you can scare me? What bothers me is that the young Beile has taken Li Mubai under his protection and I'm afraid he will be released from prison very soon. From then on, Li Mubai will soon lend a hand to De Xiaofeng!" Huang Jibei was deep in thought and came to the yamen without noticing. He sent Shunzi to hand over his business card.

"Lord Huang, His Excellency is waiting for you!"

Accompanied by Shunzi, Huang Jibei followed the official into the reception hall. He sat down for a moment, then Mao, the senior prison official, dressed in his official clothes, came to greet him. Huang Jibei said to him:

"Brother, I am coming to see you again for the same matter. This Li Mubai, whatever happens, you have to punish him. If he finds himself free, Fat Lu San and I will no longer be able to spend peaceful days."

The official Mao frowned; he seemed to be in embarrassment. He finally said:

"Yesterday, Fat Lu San also came to see me for this story. But I told him that there really is nothing more I can do about this matter. First, there is no proof, second, the young beile Tie is protecting Li Mubai. According to what he asked me, I should release Li Mubai before the first ten days of the lunar month have passed!"

"Could you not find a way to circumvent the demand of the beile?"

"And how? The beile is even more attentive to Li Mubai's case than we are. Needless to say, if Li Mubai got sick in prison and died, I would no longer be able to claim my governorship!"

Huang Jibei understood that he could not get anything out of him anymore; he just nodded and added:

"Since it is so, do as you can, I'm going!"

Governor Mao noticed Huang Jibei's somewhat displeased look and

worried. He owed him a few thousand liang of silver, not to mention that Huang Jibei had in his hands several proofs of his weak points; he couldn't quarrel with him. So he replied:

"At the moment, I still keep Li Mubai in prison for a few days. Drop by with Gros Lu San and discuss it again."

"Keeping him in prison for a while will not help!" Huang Jibei said with a cold face.

Huang Jibei, still accompanied by Shunzi, came out of the yamen. He suddenly froze and abruptly turned around in the direction of one of the side doors of the yamen. The door led to the prison. The prison official respectfully greeted Huang Jibei when he saw him arrive and said:

"Fourth Lord Huang, what can I do for you?"

"I would like to see Li Mubai, a young man whom you remember."

"Follow me, lord."

The man led him in front of Li Mubai's cell. Huang Jibei was furious that he was doing well and that his chains weren't the heaviest, but feigned pity and said:

"Brother, I heard you were in jail and just didn't believe it at first. I know you are an honest person, that was unthinkable. Yesterday, I met Xiaofeng who told me that you had been the victim of a set-up; So here I am coming to visit you. I just spoke with the senior prison official. He says you don't have to worry and that you'll be free in a few days."

Li Mubai could not help but be touched by Huang Jibei's sincerity and cordiality.

"Thank you, Brother Huang, for worrying about me like this. I've been treated pretty well lately, but all of this pisses me off. Because I corrected Fat Lu San, he mounted a plot against me; but wait a bit until I get out of here and take revenge!"

Huang Jibei got cold in the back listening to him, but he abounded

in his direction and declared indignantly:

"This Gros Lu San is really corrupt, he abuses his fortune to do what he wants. I have a deep hatred for him. Brother, when you're out, I'll tell you stories about him. If I didn't know a few people in Beijing and if I wasn't a little famous, I would have long been the victim of one of his bad shots. Until now, I have always gone through it and I have never dared to face it. He is truly someone who should not be upset. When you get out of prison, I urge you not to irritate him again, but to wait for the right time to get revenge!"

Li Mubai was furious to learn that Huang Jibei feared Fat Lu San, but restrained himself.

"When I get out of prison," he said, "I won't necessarily go look for him, moreover I thought I would rather leave Beijing. I don't have the strength to stay here any longer!"

Huang Jibei brooded; he wondered where Li Mubai wanted to go. Then he said to himself: "Wouldn't he go and join De Xiaofeng at his request to Yanqing, so that with Yang Jiantang they all gang up against me?" Huang Jibei then said to him:

"De Xiaofeng was in such a hurry to leave, it's not right of him! The two of you are very bonded, you are in prison now and, since he was coming back from Dongling, he should have stayed in looking after you. Who would have thought that, barely back, he would leave so quickly, four or five days later. If new difficulties suddenly appear in your business, how are you going to do it? He left so quiet, it was really oblivious of him!"

"No," replied Li Mubai, "I know very well that if De Xiaofeng left it is because he could not do otherwise because of this new mission. Before he left, he came to see me and said that the beile would get me out in a few days; he therefore left reassured. How can you blame a friend so wrongly!"

Huang Jibei just nodded, naturally unable to answer that. He asked Li Mubai if he needed anything he could have brought him.

"No need," Li Mubai replied, "I don't need anything here. Today the fourth lord has already visited me and I am very grateful to him."

"Come on, brother," replied Huang Jibei, "do not be so polite to me!"

The two men exchanged a few more sentences and Huang Jibei turned back.

When he got out of the prison, Shunzi asked him:

"Master, where are we going now?"

Huang Jibei was planning to visit Qiu Guangchao, the General with the Silver Lance, today, but when he thought about it, he thought to himself that his friend hated meddling in other people's business unless it was on him. In addition, his boxing master Qin Zhenyuan was present during the duel between Li Mubai and Feng Mao, and since then tended to speak of the young man as a god; and now Qiu Guangchao was in real admiration for Li Mubai. If Huang Jibei went to see him and tried to pitch him against Li Mubai for help, Qiu Guangchao would certainly refuse, and moreover lecture him. In the cart, he thought for a while, his brow furrowed, and suddenly had an idea.

"We're going to Damochang," he said to the driver, "and hurry up!"

Shunzi guessed that his master was going to the Chunyuan escort agency to speak with the Feng brothers.

Huang Jibei and the Feng brothers had never worked together in the past. Ever since Feng Mao had been defeated by Li Mubai, Huang Jibei tried by all means to establish relations with them. The eminent Feng Mao, after his defeat, had left the capital the same day and decided to withdraw from Jianghu, but Feng Huai, the Iron Staff, and Feng Long, the Little Lance, held a deep resentment against De Xiaofeng and Li Mubai, and waited for the opportunity to wash away their affronts. In recent days, Huang Jibei had often come into contact with them. When De Xiaofeng returned from Dongling, Huang Jibei even asked them to harass De Xiaofeng at his home every day, which prompted him to leave Beijing as soon as

possible.

Huang Jibei came to see them today to ask them to assemble all the escort guards from all the agencies in the capital to unite against De Xiaofeng and Li Mubai. Having explained his project to them, he did not expect Feng Long to be the first to refuse on the pretext that it would be far too difficult to achieve. Huang Jibei changed his attitude and added:

"I'm definitely not telling you that I want to fight De Xiaofeng and Li Mubai, I'm just asking you to introduce me to some of your friends. With my fame, they are unlikely to refuse to meet me!"

"Of course, everyone knows your big name, Feng Long replied with a smile. But you have never been part of their relationship and all of a sudden you ask me to introduce them to you; won't they find that suspicious? Anyway, since Wei Fengxiang, The One Who Surpasses Lü Bu, left the capital, there are no more heroes worthy of the name in Beijing; so how would you like to get over Li Mubai?"

Huang Jibei reflected with a frown, and concluded that his idea had failed. Feng Huai asked him:

"Li Mubai is really going to get out of prison?"

"I got it from the senior prison official," replied Huang Jibei, "do you think he would say anything untrue to me? The young Beile Tie is interested in the case to the point of spending money for Li Mubai and the governor does not dare to keep him prisoner! I'm not hiding anything from you," Huang Jibei sighed again, "if I oppose Li Mubai it is not out of personal revenge, but I am thinking of all my friends in the capital; ever since De Xiaofeng took this Li Mubai under his wing, he beat me, he beat you both, he also beat Fat Lu San, he dictates his law and no one dares to provoke him. If he settles in Beijing, we will never be able to gain ground again!"

The two brothers, mad with rage, exclaimed:

"Brother Huang, you're absolutely right, if Li Mubai stays in Beijing, we won't be able to do our business as we see fit!"

"Only," replied Huang Jibei, "if Xiaofeng is not a problem, who could defeat Li Mubai?"

For a while, the three men tried to find a solution. Through the window, we saw a man arrive. He seemed to glance at the rack where the weapons were lined up under the awning.

"I notice your sabers and spears are starting to rust!" the man exclaimed. "You don't seem to be maintaining them, what is this escort agency?"

Feng Huai recognized guard Mao Baokun from the Sihai Agency and said to him:

"We're not alone, so get settled in the east wing."

But Mao Baokun had already entered the room. Seeing Huang Jibei, he greeted him respectfully.

"Hey! Huang Jibei, Lean Buddha Amida, what are you doing here?"

Huang Jibei straightened up and observed him. He thought he looked like a weasel. Mao Baokun had a scar on his forehead, probably caused by a blade, and both ears protruding; he really wasn't a beauty. Huang Jibei wondered how this man knew him and said to him with a smile:

"What's your name my brother? I have a terrible memory of names."

"I often see you at the young Marquis Qiu, the Silver Lance," he replied, "but we never spoke. My name is Mao Baokun and I am from the Sihai agency, in the east of the city."

Huang Jibei suddenly thought of Qin Zhenyuan, the master of Qiu Guangchao, who once told him about a Mao Baokun from the Sihai agency who was very experienced in kung fu.

"Nice to meet you," Huang Jibei said immediately, "please sit down!"

Without the slightest embarrassment, Mao Baokun sat down facing Huang Jibei then poured himself a bowl of tea. Feng Huai and Feng

Long both looked askance at him. Huang Jibei addressed a few cordial words to him, but Mao Baokun did not pay the slightest attention and then suddenly said:

"Fourth Lord Huang, do you know that Li Mubai will be released soon?"

Huang Jibei remained silent; how could he know? He pretended to be detached from this matter and shook his head.

"I did not know. We don't know each other well, so I didn't take care of his case."

Mao Baokun simply nodded and poured himself more tea. Feng Long started chatting about things with him but Mao Baokun addressed Huang Jibei again:

"Lord Huang, although this is our first meeting, let me tell you that I find your words to ring false. Of all the people in Beijing who have heard of Li Mubai, who doesn't know that it was you, big brother, and Fat Lu San who played a dirty trick on him?"

Huang Jibei turned pale with fear. He who had just spoken to Li Mubai and who was delighted at the moment that Xiaofeng had not spoken of his involvement in his arrest, now he learned that this man was aware of his plot against Li Mubai, like everyone else in Beijing! When Li Mubai found out when he got out of prison, he was sure to come and get him, sword in hand! Huang Jibei thought for a moment, stunned.

The two brothers were themselves amazed. Mao Baokun, who had guessed correctly and who had just uncovered the secret of Huang Jibei, said, a small smile on his lips:

"Lord Huang, you can't hide anything from me! They say these last days that the exit of Li Mubai really worries you. Instantly, as soon as I saw your cart parked in front, I quickly came to see if it was really you. In my opinion, now that the beile Tie is protecting Li Mubai, no one will dare to oppose him once he is free. Li Mubai is a very proud person, he will want revenge. First, he will find Fat Lu San, then you, Lord Huang. I don't underestimate you brother, but if

Li Mubai has his sword with him, I don't give a lot of your skin."

Huang Jibei was more and more anxious and ashamed. He said, blushing:

"I neglected my kung fu for a long time, of course I will not match Li Mubai!"

"At first," said Mao Baokun, "I thought Li Mubai was a stranger out of nowhere. Recently, a friend who came to visit me from my home province, Julu District, told me that Li Mubai was the disciple of the famous knight Ji Guangjie, who is now dead; no wonder he's so good at martial arts! I'm afraid we won't find anyone in Beijing who can beat him. Brother Huang and Marquis Qiu joined forces to defeat Wei Fengxiang; I heard that in Shahe, after a brief exchange, Li Mubai beat him. I really think if you want to get it under control, you're going to have to bring someone in.

"But who do you want to bring? Brother Huang is the best-known brave man in Zhili Province," exclaimed Feng Long, "if even he doesn't do the trick, who else could subdue Li Mubai?"

Mao Baokun pouted and said smiling:

"Of course there is someone! So you have never heard of Miao Zhenshan called the Fish that swallows the Boats? Or his nephew Zhang Yujin, the Golden Spear, who enjoys an even greater reputation? If we can bring these two men to the capital, we will not have lifted a finger, but Li Mubai will have fled in terror."

Huang Jibei was under the spell.

"I've always wanted to know these two big names," he says. "But none of us have any relation with them, how could they come from Henan to answer our invitation?"

"It's very easy," said Mao Baokun. "I am on excellent terms with Miao Zhenshan; Three years ago, I went to visit him in Henan, Zhumadian. If I go looking for him, there will be no problem, and if he comes, he will certainly call on his nephew Zhang Yujin."

"He has never met us, and he has no enmity towards Li Mubai, why



would he take such a long trip to lend us a hand?"

The Feng brothers were also skeptical:

"It won't be so easy to get him to move!"

Mao Baokun, a small smile on his lips, seemed convinced otherwise. He took a sip of tea and said:

"Lord Huang, you only have one letter to write telling him to come and provide him with money for the travel expenses, and I can assure you that in less than a month he will be in Beijing. If you invite him and he doesn't come, I no longer deserve my job as a guard at the Sihai agency!"

Mao Baokun's assurance did not fail to confuse Huang Jibei. He thought, "Who could have said that this Mao Baokun is so close to Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin? If he does manage to get them to come and they beat Li Mubai, I don't mind losing my purse strings!" Huang Jibei was delighted and thought about asking how much money to put towards travel expenses, but Feng Long, the Little Lance, said:

"Brother Mao, I can't just rely on what you tell us. We need proof and say why Miao Zhenshan would listen to you; then I will trust you!"

Mao Baokun looked annoyed and replied coldly:

"In reality, I take care of what does not concern me. I have no enmity towards Li Mubai, why go so far to find someone who will oppose him? If you don't believe me when I tell you I can bring Miao Zhenshan back to you, it's really to treat me with contempt! I'm telling you the truth. Miao Zhenshan is fierce and brutal, and does not care for friends. He is also a rich man. It doesn't matter what knowledge you have or the money you offer him, if you invite him, he won't come. Only, currently in Beijing there is a story... an affair that is related to Li Mubai. If I tell him about it, he will be sure to leave for the capital immediately!"

Huang Jibei and the Feng brothers then hastened to question him

about this matter, but Mao Baokun only smiled and said:

"That would take too long to tell you!"

Mao Baokun reached out for a refill but Feng Long rushed to the teapot and took care of it for him.

Mao Baokun, while drinking his tea, related:

"Miao Zhenshan, the Fish that swallows the Boats, is really very good at martial arts! Lately, he was doing nothing, except one tour every year in the neighboring regions. Several mountain bandits used to put aside the finest pieces of the loot they collected and offer them to him as a token of respect when he came to see them. If they didn't, Miao Zhenshan wiped out their lair, usually requisitioning officers and soldiers. Miao Zhenshan is neither a civil servant nor a thief. It was by relying on his martial skills and his steel darts that he built his immense fortune and became the richest man in Zhumadian. He is now more than fifty years old and maintains several dozen women. They are hardly more than twenty years old and all are of real beauty. Their life with him is really not easy. If one of them angers him or arouses his suspicion by talking to a young man, Miao Zhenshan will invariably whip her to death. More than one has died under his blows. Three years ago, when I visited him, he fell very ill and could not get out of bed. He was nevertheless very kind to me and still received me in his interior apartments. We chatted about Jianghu business; he even asked his wives to serve me, he had no suspicion of me. He suspected that I was not the type to be able to seduce one of them."

Huang Jibei couldn't help but emit a small laugh. Feng Huai was starting to get impatient and said to him:

"You couldn't cut it short, though! What is this story at the end; Could it be that Li Mubai took one of his wives from him?"

Mao Baokun was silent for a while, thinking about Miao Zhenshan's lovely wives, then, after taking a sip of tea, he continued:

"One of them was particularly dazzling, even more charming than the most beautiful paintings; she was the daughter of a certain Xie

Qi, an itinerant acrobat traversing the Jianghu. Old Xie Qi protected her like a precious treasure. Several rich and influential men had wanted to take her for their wife, but he had always opposed it. Subsequently, they fell into the hands of Miao Zhenshan, who forcibly removed her, but who at first showed her a lot of attention. Her father could not resign himself to it and, catching Miao Zhenshan by surprise, he recovered his daughter and they fled. They didn't get very far; Miao Zhenshan quickly caught up with them and inflicted severe beatings on them. Old Xie Qi succumbed to the beatings given to him and Miao Zhenshan retrieved the girl.

"Young Xie is very skillful. After being caught, she continually flattered Miao Zhenshan, beguiling him until he calmed down. She remained quiet for over a year. But in the end, she and her mother took advantage of Miao Zhenshan's absence to escape again. Upon his return, Miao Zhenshan was in a terrible fury upon learning of this and sent men to find them, to no avail. Since then, Miao Zhenshan has always cursed young Xie and keeps repeating that one day or another he will find his debauched wife and be merciless towards her. I learned this story last year. Just recently, at the beginning of the month, I ran into young Xie by chance. So she had fled to Beijing and is working there now; her courtesan name is Cuixian. She works in the House of Sumptuous Treasures and I heard that Li Mubai was one of her regulars!"

Huang Jibei couldn't believe it.

"Cuixian from the House of Sumptuous Treasures is actually Miao Zhenshan's wife? What a pity that she did not marry Li Mubai earlier, and is now with Lord Xu. If he comes to Beijing, Miao Zhenshan will go after him, not Li Mubai!"

"I have thought about all that," replied Mao Baokun, "but although Cuixian is married to Lord Xu, she cannot forget Li Mubai, who will not be able to resign himself either. Sooner or later they will have problems. If I go to see Miao Zhenshan in Zhumadian, I will simply tell him that it was Li Mubai who kidnapped his wife and that he recently sold her to Lord Xu. With his character, Miao Zhenshan will immediately return to Beijing. There, we will give him a warm welcome, and he will take care of Li Mubai and Lord Xu. We will only have to observe the fight of the two tigers from the top of the

mountain (118); So, what do you think?"

"It would be really bitter for old Lord Xu!" Huang Jibei replied.

"What?" exclaimed Mao Baokun. "Could it be possible that you are intimate with him?"

"No," replied Huang Jibei, "I have no relation with him. Well, I'm going home to write that famous letter and slip some money into it. I am in your hands, Mao Baokun, to bring Miao Zhenshan back to the capital. Before his arrival in Beijing, it would still be better if this matter remains between us!"

Mao Baokun and the Feng brothers exclaimed together:

"But of course!"

Huang Jibei went home to write the letter to Miao Zhenshan. The main points were as follows:

"I have wanted to meet you for a long time and I am looking forward to meeting you. My younger brother Mao Baokun took the trouble to come and invite you to go to Beijing; please accept this modest sum for your trip. Hope you can get to the capital as soon as possible, I'm so impatient."

The letter still included several polite expressions. Huang Jibei had not mentioned the amount of the sum he offered him for travel expenses, and thus gave Mao Baokun a chance to earn some money in the process. In total, he had attached to the letter one thousand liang, five hundred in coins and another five hundred in banknotes. He had also set aside a hundred liang of money for Mao Baokun's expenses. Huang Jibei specially instructed his steward Hao San to hand it over to the Sihai agency. Hao San left for a long time then finally returned, announcing:

"Mao Baokun received the letter and the money well. He said he was finishing some personal business today and would be on his way tomorrow morning. He clarified that the sooner he leaves, the sooner he will be back."

Huang Jibei nodded, satisfied. He felt light and delighted but

couldn't help but think, "We have never met with Miao Zhenshan. What if Mao Baokun had put together this whole story to swindle these thousand Rangs from me and thus went looking for him and never returned to the capital? So, how to do? I don't want to be called a pigeon and end up being the laughing stock of everyone! This is unlikely," he thought finally. "Mao Baokun is a guard at the Sihai Agency, he can't do that sort of thing. The main thing, anyway, is that he tells Cuixian's story to Miao Zhenshan and the furious one comes back to Beijing. As for the money, it doesn't matter to me that Mao Baokun doesn't pay Miao Zhenshan all of it or even hide it altogether. What worries me, it is that distant water cannot extinguish a nearby fire (119) and that, even in haste, Miao Zhenshan will never be there for twenty to thirty days. Until then, if Li Mubai gets out of prison and comes looking for me with his sword, how am I going to get out of it?" Huang Jibei was tormented at the highest point.

The next day, Feng Huai, the Iron Staff, came to see him to tell him that Mao Baokun had left early in the morning, but also to complain. He felt that Huang Jibei had given Mao Baokun too much money for his travel expenses, while he and his brother had also gone to great lengths for him and received only fifty Rangs from him. Huang Jibei did not dare to irritate him any longer and gave him another fifty Rangs. Feng Huai, satisfied, left. Huang Jibei, by dint of losing money like this to Li Mubai, got seriously angry. He relapsed and resumed coughing and spitting. He couldn't go out for a few days.

Four days later, as night was falling and Huang Jibei's beloved concubine was making sure that he was taking his remedies, the young servant Shunzi entered the room and said:

"Lord Lu San is here!"

Huang Jibei did not have time to answer Shunzi to ask him to come in that he was already entering the room. Huang Jibei then asked his concubine to help him straighten up into a sitting position. The Gros Lu San was huffing like an ox and was in complete panic. He stamped his foot and said:

"It's maddening! Thanks to the beile's help, Li Mubai has just been

released!"

Huang Jibei looked terrified. He was seized with a coughing fit and asked:

"When did he get out of prison?"

"Just now! The official Hu Qitu came to send me a message from the yamen. I understood that Li Mubai would soon be coming to pick you up. He gets irritated easily," he continued, very nervous and still stamping his feet, "he's a poor wretch who is ready for anything. If he comes asking for revenge, what are the two of us going to do?"

Huang Jibei reflected, "Li Mubai certainly does not yet know that I was indirectly involved in his arrest, but I still have to remain vigilant." Huang Jibei once again coughed violently and asked:

"And anything else, other than that?"

"What else," replied Fat Lu San. "Someone has vouched for Li Mubai who is under house arrest for a month; it must remain at the disposal of the court. The yamen decreed this to keep up appearances!"

"But wasn't it better if they told him to leave the capital immediately?" Huang Jibei exclaimed. "Now he will be able to stay in Beijing with complete peace of mind!"

Fat Lu San sat down on a chair without ceasing to worry. Huang Jibei didn't want anyone to notice that he feared Li Mubai.

"I am of course not afraid of Li Mubai, but I am sick; if he comes looking for me, we can't tell who will have the upper hand. Only you... Don't worry, I'll tell you a couple of little things that are useful. First, in the evening, you must not leave your home; second, for the next few days, avoid going to your concubine's residence, stay at home and close the doors tightly. I don't think Li Mubai is the type to jump up on the rooftops to pick you up!"

Fat Lu San seemed quite satisfied with this advice and nodded. It was already dark outside and he dared not linger any longer. He

straightened up and said:

"Okay, I'm going home, we'll talk about this again tomorrow!"

"Don't be in such a hurry," Huang Jibei replied. "I'll tell two of my men to take you home."

Huang Jibei asked his guards Hou Liang, the Local Despot, and Jia Qiu with the Pointed Stick to escort Fat Lu San to his home.

Huang Jibei, lying on the kang and diminished by illness, was thinking about how to counter Li Mubai.

## Chapter 18

*Sparks fly from precious swords,*

*The fear can be read in the eyes of the delicate "courtesan knight";*

*She hides to cry by candlelight.*

*The painful words break the feelings that remained.*

The news that Fat Lu San had gleaned turned out to be true. Li Mubai had indeed just been released. Escorted by two guards from the yamen (1), the young man was led to Shi's small shop so that he could vouch for him. Li Mubai didn't forget to give the guards a few bowls of alcohol, and it wasn't until they left the tavern that he could finally feel truly free.

The young man then thanked Shi the Fat:

"Boss, thank you for taking care of me. You regularly sent your employee to bring me food, I will be eternally grateful to you!"

"Lord Li," he replied smiling, "it's nothing! You came to see us every day; how much did we earn on your purse? You had some trouble with the law and I sent my young clerk to see you a few times, it's quite normal; why make so much of it? Your release makes me more happy than anyone. Come on, I'll start by warming you up some alcohol and then you'll taste my new sautéed crab in wine!"

Li Mubai stopped him in his tracks:

"In prison, I did not run out of alcohol. Now that I'm out, I would like to rest a bit. I will come back tomorrow."

Glancing behind him to make sure there were no customers, Li Mubai continued in a low voice:

"Boss Shi, the other night, you were full of good intentions towards me. I must have disappointed you! But with a relative in the capital, I couldn't do that."



As if he didn't understand what Li Mubai had just told him, Shi smiled, then exclaimed, raising his head:

"Lord Zhang San, good morning! Sit down, please!"

A customer in an unlined dress had just entered. Li Mubai immediately fell silent and gave a small nod to Shi and the employee.

"See you tomorrow!" He called out before leaving them.

He walked along the Prime Minister's Lane and returned to Faming Temple. After he knocked on the front door, a monk appeared.

"You are back Lord Li!" exclaimed the monk, very happy to see him again. "You have truly been the victim of a terrible injustice!"

Li Mubai was convinced that after this story, the monks would no longer tolerate his presence among them. To his surprise, the monk seemed quite warm. He felt full of gratitude.

"I have indeed been wrongly accused!" he replied as he entered. "Let me explain. That you care about me in this way goes straight to my heart!"

When they both arrived in the courtyard adjoining the main courtyard, the monk opened the door to Li Mubai's bedroom. The latter entered and began to look for the oil lamp. Once it was lit, Li Mubai could see that the room had been tidied up and cleaned, and that his precious sword was still hanging on the wall, intact, like an old acquaintance found after a long separation. The monk observed Li Mubai, his hair all disheveled and his beard growing.

"Lord Li has really lost weight!" he said.

"I am now cleared of all suspicion. Life goes on!"

"Luckily, Lord Li met the young beile (2) Tie; without him, it would have been difficult to get you out of this mess on your own. In the end, the gods protected you!" Exclaimed his interlocutor before joining his hands to declaim an emitufo (3).

Li Mubai was amazed: how could this man know that the beile Tie had come to his aid? He was about to ask him the question but the monk continued:

"A few days ago, the young Beile sent a messenger to give us a donation of forty liang of silver and tell us that you are coming out soon. He ordered us not to get rid of the things you had left in your room. Anyway, the same night the guards took you away, we had locked your door, and your things could not have gone missing."

"I do not have much," replied Li Mubai who had just understood. "I'm embarrassed that you've gone to so much trouble for me."

"Come on, come on, it's nothing!" The monk exclaimed before leaving the room.

He returned shortly after to bring him a teapot. Li Mubai thanked him. He had barely left prison, and the monk well suspected that he should rest; he only chatted for a few moments before leaving him.

Li Mubai checked his things in his canvas bag; nothing was missing. He felt truly grateful to young Beile Tie. Not only had he disbursed large sums to the yamen for his business, but, knowing where he resided, he had also greased the monks' paw beforehand. Without him, who knows what an icy welcome he would have received on his return to the temple! Li Mubai then thought of Fat Lu San, who had mounted this blow against him to have him thrown in jail; how many other men must have endured his treacherous maneuvers in this way? If no one took charge of eliminating this tyrant, honest people could never live in peace. When he was released from prison, the yamen begged Li Mubai to remain at the court's disposal for a month. It was therefore impossible for him to join De Xiaofeng in Yanqing, and he had to wait patiently for a while. Li Mubai planned to go to the Sumptuous Treasures House to see Xianniang. The fact of learning of his arrest must have totally confused her! In the days to come, he would go visit her and let her know the truth about this affair, entirely engineered by Fat Lu San to harm him. She had to know that he had never been a Jianghu bandit. Deep in thought, he was deeply moved. He closed the door and blew out the lamp, then stretched out on the kang.

During his stay in prison, he had slept with chains on rice straw. Snuggling under cozy blankets now felt extremely pleasant. He didn't wake up until the next day, to the red rays of the sun shining through his window. As soon as he got up, he went to a bathhouse near the temple. He washed, shaved, had his hair done; facing the mirror, he finally found the elegant young man he was, although a little emaciated.

Back at the temple, he put on his sapphire blue robe, lined with light silk, put on his boots, and wrote his business card himself. Once out, he hired a cart to go to Anding Gate, to the beile Tie's residence. On the main avenue Qianmen, the knight crossed several local thugs who recognized him immediately. They stared at the cart where he was. Li Mubai, unperturbed, kept his head naturally high.

Soon after, the cart entered the inner city (7). He rode a long time before finally arriving at the residence of the beile. Li Mubai stopped the driver, paid him, got out and headed for the palace gate. He bowed respectfully to the servant at the entrance and said, handing him his card:

"My name is Li, and I come see the Second Lord of the Princely Residence."

The servant glanced at the card, then nodded:

"Good! Please wait a moment here, I'll let you know!"

After looking Li Mubai from head to toe, he finally went back inside.

Li Mubai observed the imposing vermilion door at the entrance to the beile Tie's residence, and the spacious forecourt where countless servants came and went; everything was truly worthy of a princely family. Shortly after, he saw Delu running to meet him, all smiles.

"Lord Li is out!" he exclaimed. "Congratulations, we are delighted! The Second Lord invites you to come in and have a chat!"

Li Mubai respectfully thanked Delu. "I didn't get out of prison until

last night; I come today to visit the Second Lord to thank him for saving me."

While speaking, Li Mubai followed Delu inside the residence. They passed two spacious courtyards, then, under the western corridor, Delu begged Li Mubai to enter a room and settle there. He served him a bowl of tea and stayed talking to him.

Shortly after, footsteps echoed in the hallway and a person began to cough. Delu hastened to open the curtain on the door as Li Mubai stood up. The young beile Tie, Little Mustaches, appeared. Li Mubai immediately stepped forward, bowing as respectfully as possible.

"Please! Let's dispense with courtesies!" The cheerful beile exclaimed enthusiastically, inviting him to sit down.

His host took the place of honor, Li Mubai to his right. The beile questioned him, a smile on his lips:

"You were released yesterday, weren't you? How do you feel?"

"I'm fine," Li Mubai replied, sitting up slightly. "Night was beginning to fall when I went out; I rested until the morning and today I come to see the Second Lord to thank him very much for the great favor he did me by saving my life!"

"I am unworthy of your compliments!" exclaimed the beile. "You have been the victim of a conspiracy, everyone knows that. We should have helped you, especially those on official Imperial government salaries! Despite my title of nobility, I am still quite a boorish person. I like to practice boxing, but my capacities in kung fu are hardly dazzling; that's why I admire people gifted in martial arts. Of course I know Qiu Guangchao, our families have always been on excellent terms. If I have come into contact with people like Huang Jibei or De Xiaofeng, it is only because they practice martial arts.

"You haven't been in Beijing for a long time, but you have already defeated Huang Jibei, the Lean Buddha Amida, as well as Feng Mao, the Golden Sabers. I immediately understood that you were a brave out of the ordinary and I intended to visit you. I was very

concerned when the yamen arrested you. I spoke to Governor Mao to do you a favor. Then De Xiaofeng came home from his mission and insisted on vouching for you, as if you had been a relative of his own, which settled the matter. It's a thing of the past now. These painful days in prison will have given you an experience and perhaps also helped to reduce the impetuosity that all young men your age have. We went to great lengths for you with De Xiaofeng, but it's normal with friends and you don't have to take it into account. As for the men who wanted to harm you, you know who they are, but quarreling with them again won't do you any good. Public opinion will decide; after this affair, it is better to avoid these kinds of treacherous and malicious men, period!"

Li Mubai nodded at every word.

"I won't quarrel again in the future!" He said finally.

Thinking back to the fact that De Xiaofeng had vouched for him, Li Mubai let out a few tears of gratitude.

The young Beile Tie then questioned him about his family situation, as well as the teaching he had received in martial arts. Li Mubai recounted in detail his childhood spent with his parents in Jiangnan (9). After their death, Jiang Nanhe took it upon himself to bring him to the north, to his uncle's, so that he could take care of his education. Afterwards, Li Mubai had taken the instruction of an old knight errant, Ji Guangjie. The beile listened to his story in ecstasy.

"So," he exclaimed, "you are a hero whose knight's talent has been passed down from generation to generation!"

The two men spoke at length, exchanging their views on different martial schools and techniques.

Little Mustaches, the beile Tie, excelled at boxing. For the time being, several fencing masters were staying with him to teach him the art of the sword, but their knowledge remained very ordinary. He was now conversing with Li Mubai who briefly told him what he had learned, and he could not help but get excited:

"Mubai, I listen to you attentively and I realize that I do not hear

anything. However, I studied this weapon for a long time and thought I knew a little about it. But there, I have the impression of being a frog at the bottom of the well that would never have seen anything of the wide world. Since you don't look tired, I have a request for you!"

Surprised, Li Mubai hastened to sit up.

"Second Lord, what do you want to ask me? Speak freely!"

"For a long time now, I would like to see you practice your art. You have just explained many fencing techniques to me, and I have only one desire: to see you at work. Let's go to the western courtyard: could you not do a sword dance there and thus open my eyes?"

Li Mubai replied as modestly as possible:

"Second Lord, I just told you, I did indeed spend my time studying literature and martial arts, but I never practiced kung fu. Please don't make me show you my awkwardness!"

"Don't be polite with me," the young Beile Tie smirked. "You defeated Feng Mao, the Golden Sabers, and Huang Jibei, the Lean Buddha Amida, and you want me to believe that you have no talent? Who could believe you?"

Li Mubai had to give a demonstration; in truth, it was not the urge that was lacking. The young Beile then grabs his arm and says:

"You will see, I have in this court a ground completely suitable for the practice of the sword or boxing."

While pulling Li Mubai out of the room, he turned to Delu and ordered him:

"Go to the library and bring me back what I need!"

The two men walked along the corridor and came to a huge courtyard.

In the middle were several carriage sheds as well as a stable where excellent horses were penned. In the southwest corner of the

courtyard stretched a flat ground, the place of daily kung fu training of the young beile. Two guards were practicing boxing. They stopped immediately as soon as they saw the beile. The latter approached them and said, pointing to Li Mubai:

"I present to you my friend Li Mubai, the man who beat Huang Jibei with his fists and whose sword defeated Feng Mao the Golden Sabers!"

The two guards, both experienced boxers, looked closely at Li Mubai. They greeted him with a fist in the other hand and paid their respects to him. Li Mubai returned politeness to them with a smile.

"Tell everyone to come," said the beile. "Today, I begged Li Mubai to perform a sword dance for us, so that he might open our eyes a little!"

Realizing that Li Mubai was going to reward them with a demonstration, the two hastened to comply.

"Second Lord, I will already make a fool of myself in front of you. Why invite other people to laugh at me?"

"They all know you," he replied. "I want them to observe your technique for their personal edification. Five expert boxing guards and three martial arts masters currently reside in my house," he added, their mastery of kung fu is most ordinary and they have never met a single famous person."

As they chatted, Delu was already returning with two swords in hand.

"Take a look at this child," he continued. "Ask him to bring back a sword, he comes back with two blades. Would he like to see us both fight?"

Realizing then that the beile wanted to compete with him, Li Mubai found the situation very embarrassing. How could he start a fight with his benefactor, the one who saved his life? The young beile picked up one of the swords and pulled it out of its scabbard.

"Mubai, take a look," he told him. How much do you think this precious sword is worth?"

Li Mubai watched him carefully. Its blade was a rather faint blue green, but it seemed extremely sharp. This sword was by no means an ordinary weapon. He weighed it.

"I am afraid that such a sword cannot be obtained, even with several thousand liang of silver!"

"What insight! This sword was offered to me by a general, it does not date from Antiquity but from the end of the Han (11). Unfortunately, it has already been sharpened several times. I have others still more remarkable; for now, take this one, I'll show them to you later."

The fencing masters and the guards had all arrived. They respectfully greeted Li Mubai with folded hands.

"Lord Li, display your art and open our eyes!"

"Everyone is here," continued the beile, "so do us a dance!"

Li Mubai tucked the flaps of his long dress into his pants and walked to the center of the field. Sword in hand, he saluted them.

"Second Lord Tie, gentlemen, please don't laugh at me!"

The sword then rose, cutting through the air with cold light. Nimble as a monkey and light as a crane, Li Mubai made his blade dance for a long time. At his side, the beile did not lose sight of any of his movements; he was ecstatic, admiring. Li Mubai finished his routines and then greeted the assembly again.

"It's very little," he said humbly. "Please be indulgent!"

This aerial dance, which a simple person would have considered banal, the beile found it breathtaking. It was obvious to him that Li Mubai's practice of the sword was the result of a long study of kung fu. Full of admiration, the beile retrieved the second sword held by Delu. He stepped onto the field and approached Li Mubai while pulling it out of its scabbard.



"Let's face each other!" he exclaimed then.

"I would never dare to fight against you," declared Li Mubai.

"How so?" asked the beile. "Are you afraid of hurting me? Don't worry, I'll ask that we wrap our swords in a silken cloth."

"I'm not afraid of hurting you, but I know full well that I will not be a match. I have already been laughed at enough by everyone; if I lose, I will never dare to represent myself in front of you again!"

Li Mubai's modesty seemed to annoy the boy somewhat.

"Mubai," he said, "I don't think I've ever met someone as modest as you! Ask the fencing masters a little, they all fought against me. Sometimes it's me who wins, sometimes it's them. No matter. We are just entertaining ourselves, and when we are weary of martial arts, we go out to eat."

Beside them, the guards exclaimed, hilariously:

"The Second Lord is a frank and loyal person: if he wins, it naturally gives him joy; if he loses, it doesn't matter. Lord Li, don't be so embarrassed!"

Li Mubai, embarrassed, blushed conspicuously. The beile Tie, who had just spoken a little harshly, feared that Li Mubai was mistaken. Tapping the young man on the shoulder, he exclaimed with a smile:

"My abilities are much lower than yours, but I want to compete with you. You who beat Feng Mao the Golden Sabers, what would you have to fear from me?"

He begged Delu to have the two blades wrapped in red silk, but Li Mubai intervened:

"Let's forget that. Swords wrapped in silk are impractical to use. Second Lord, I just ask you for a little indulgence!"

The beile burst out laughing. After Delu arranged his clothes for him, he raised his blade towards Li Mubai to attack him. The latter reacted quickly and parried with his sword. The young beile took

the opportunity to come forward and hit him over the head. Instantly, Li Mubai leaned over, swerving. Again, the beile rushed forward. He aimed at the left flank of his opponent, who blocked him with force; the two swords clashed with a thud.

"Nice parry!" Exclaimed the beile.

He rushed again to hit him in the left shoulder. Li Mubai pulled away from the opposing blade and bounded over to the beile, hugging him closely. The latter, taken aback, panicked somewhat.

"Be careful, he will turn around!" Someone suddenly cried.

Li Mubai effectively turned and brought his sword down on the beile, who, alerted, hastened to raise his blade horizontally to ward off the blow.

Li Mubai let his guard down and chuckled. He faced the person who had screamed. It was a young man of about twenty, dressed in short clothes, and who seemed to work in the stable. His eyes were clear and mischievous, he was rather short and had a pale complexion. How could he have anticipated my attack? Li Mubai wondered. At the same moment, the guards and fencing masters muttered to him that he should not intervene. Delu, like the fox who takes advantage of the tiger's prestige to scare other animals, exclaimed:

"When you should be brushing the horses, you are running here to watch the fight. And in addition you dare to open your mouth! Get out!"

The young man took a few steps back, a small smile on his lips. The beile intervened, however:

"Don't chase him away, let him watch!"

Disinterested in the incident, the beile raised his blade again to attack Li Mubai. But his attention was now riveted on the young man and he no longer had the heart to fight against the beile. Li Mubai just warded off the blows by stepping back. The beile suddenly brandished his blade and rushed at him. Li Mubai threw himself aside, leaping behind his opponent's back who turned and

attacked again. With a thunderous noise, Li Mubai blocked the blade with his sword; sparks flew in all directions.

"Second lord," smiles Li Mubai, "let's stop there, I admit defeat!"

Li Mubai's parry had numbed the beile's right hand and shook his whole arm. Breathless and sweating, he too wasn't unhappy to stop there.

"I really admire you," he replied, all smiles. You deserve your reputation so quickly acquired.

"The Second Lord has found in Lord Li an opponent of his size!" exclaimed in their turn the guards and fencing masters.

"Do you think," exclaimed the beile, "it was not easy!"

Li Mubai was handing the old sword to Delu when the beile exclaimed:

"Take this sword, I'll give it to you! I have many other blades even better than this one!"

Li Mubai very humbly took the sword from Delu's hand and thanked the beile.

"Let's go inside and sit down for a while!"

Li Mubai nodded while glancing at the young man who had anticipated his attack and thus warned his master. The latter stared at him with shining, expressive eyes without looking away. Li Mubai was about to approach him and start a conversation, but the beile was already on his way, and he had no choice but to follow him into the main courtyard.

Along the corridor, they returned to the room where Delu had greeted him and again drank tea. The young beile demanded that Li Mubai come back to see him often, then added:

"If you need money or something else, you can tell me without embarrassment!"

Li Mubai nodded several times, thanked him again, and finally took his leave. The beile Tie begged Delu to accompany him home.

Delu handed him the sword in front of the entrance to the residence; Li Mubai took the opportunity to question him:

"During the fight, a person intervened. What place does this young man occupy in the residence?"

"Don't worry about him, Lord Li," he replied. "His name is Little Yu, he's just the handyman in the stable, the one who brushes and feeds the horses. I don't know how he dares to be so insolent in the presence of the beile; fortunately the Second Lord has a good character. From another master, he would certainly have received a severe beating before being kicked out. He really does not know how to behave!"

"How long has he been at the residence?"

"He's been here for almost a year," Delu explained. "He was recommended by a llama who trades in fur and with whom the beile is on very good terms. In reality, the stable is not lacking in personnel: it has more than ten men. He is not of much use there, but it would have been difficult to refuse."

Li Mubai nodded, then bade him farewell. Sword in hand, he headed south. This guy named Yu, he thought, is certainly an unfortunate and unsung hero. Earlier, I did not expect him to anticipate my response. Originally, it was a secret maneuver that was given to me by my teacher Ji Guangjie. He knows a lot about martial arts, that's for sure, and I even believe him very strongly. Why does he agree to do this kind of low chore taking care of the horses of the princely residence? Li Mubai decided that the next day he would carefully observe the young man. If he did indeed have any real talent, he would tell the beile Tie. The latter could not maintain incompetent fencing masters, while a hero saw his skills misused while working in the stable. Li Mubai rented a cart and drove directly south of the city. He begged the driver to stop the vehicle at the northern entrance to Prime Minister's Lane, and paid him. He then made his way to Shi the Fat's little tavern.

As soon as he saw the elegantly dressed Li Mubai arrive, sword in hand, Fat Shi exclaimed:

"Lord Li, have you been to beile Tie's residence?"

"Right," replied Li Mubai. "I have just spoken to him and he offered me this precious blade. Look!"

"I see it! But I don't know anything about it, you know that," he replied, smiling.

Yet, the sword out of its scabbard, he exclaimed in admiration:

"This sword is really of great value!"

"What do you see in it then?" Li Mubai hastened to ask.

"Nothing in particular, it's just that if the beile gave it to you, it could only be a precious sword."

Li Mubai smiled but thought: Shi, stop fooling around a bit, do you really think I don't see what kind of person you are? He turned around, and saw that there were no more customers in the room. He was firmly determined to question Shi the Fat about his past and extract the truth from him. With a smirk, Li Mubai was about to question him when Shi placed food and liquor in front of him and said, "Lord Li, drink quietly. Then I have to talk to you!"

Li Mubai poured himself a glass, took a sip and said:

"What do you have to tell me?"

Shi, one hand on the counter, tilted his head:

"Do you know that Cuixian, your friend from the House of Sumptuous Treasures, got married to Xu, the assistant minister?"

It was as if Li Mubai was punched in the face. He put down his glass and asked:

"Who told you? And when did she get married to him?"

"Lord Li, don't worry, I'll tell you everything!"

Shi the Fat moved closer to him.

"I sensed it from the day you were arrested. Your imprisonment allowed Gros Lu San to get revenge and Assistant Minister Xu took the opportunity to marry Cuixian. I was really not reassured, fearing that she would fall into their trap. I guessed correctly: she did indeed go with old Xu. The day after your arrest, after dressing in my best clothes, I went to the House of Sumptuous Treasures to meet her. I warned her: "Lord Li is a good person. Fat Lu San and Assistant Minister Xu greased the yamen officials' paws and plotted against him. But in Beijing, Lord Li's wealthy friends are numerous, and without evidence against him, he will certainly be released in a few days. Until then if Fat Lu San or old Xu contact you and say they want to marry you, you must not accept under any circumstances; if Lord Li's friends found out, they wouldn't forgive you!"

"What did she say to that?" Li Mubai hastened to ask.

"Cuixian swore to me that she would never marry old Xu. But, three days had not passed when Assistant Minister Xu sent her a palanquin to take her to celebrate their wedding. They now all live together in the second residence of Gros Lu San, in the Field of maneuver alley. Lord Xu and Fat Lu San spend their day hanging out there. As soon as I heard this story, I had a burst of anger, but thinking about it, I thought Cuixian was just a courtesan. It doesn't matter whether Xu is old or not, she and her mother are now out of the woods!"

Li Mubai turned pale with nervousness. He lifted the pitcher of alcohol, but was so stunned that he finally put it back on the table.

"I can't believe Xianniang willingly married Xu!" he suddenly exclaimed. "There is certainly another reason for this! Fat Lu San and Lord Xu must have scared them with this arrest, and Xianniang must have thought that she had no choice but to get married. She must be really unhappy now."

"No matter what she feels, Cuixian has fallen into old Xu's hands.

Even if she didn't want to, I would be surprised if she tried to kill herself! Lord Li listen to me, I assure you that with the maidens, there can be no sincere words. And let me speak frankly to you: if you hadn't known Cuixian, would you have ended up in prison? You are young and talented, your future is in front of you, do not fall in love with a girl! I assure you that even a strong man can get screwed by a woman. Cuixian is married now, that's great, forget about her! Lord Li, now you have to make a point of making yourself a reputation, then you will have all the girls you want!"

"Boss Shi, what you say is very correct," pointed out Li Mubai with a weak smile. "I must not fall in love with a woman, a hero does not let go. However, I remain convinced that Xianniang did not voluntarily marry Lord Xu. He had coveted her for a long time and had already spent large sums of money to conquer her, but she never responded to his advances. I find myself in prison, and here she accepts the marriage; How is it possible? There is bound to be a reason, I must see her again at all costs and ask!"

Faced with Li Mubai's torments, Shi understood that he had already committed himself to Xianniang. Li Mubai seemed ready to kidnap the wife. It was obvious that he would not be easily resigned. Shi stopped giving him recommendations and asked him:

"And so Lord Li, assuming you see her again, what will you say to her?"

Li Mubai, worried, continued to drink. This question seemed to irritate him.

"I won't tell her nonsense: I will just ask her whether or not she sincerely consented to this marriage!"

"And if she tells you that she really wanted to marry this old man, what will you do?"

"In that case, I will just have to accept it. Even though it troubled me, I will know from now on that you should not talk about feelings with a courtesan. On the other hand, Xu and Fat Lu San insulted me. If I find out that they forced her to marry, I will not forgive them and will do my best to make them pay, even if it must

cost me my life!"

Li Mubai banged his fist on the table, shaking the jug and glass.

Shi the Fat smirked. After a while he said:

"We can fix that. The residence of Fat Lu San and Lord Xu is very close to here. The house is recent, west of the lane, you will easily find the door with its two large threshold stones. You could stand in front of the entrance, Cuixian will end up going out one day.

"Meeting her is not a problem," Li Mubai said coldly. "But I haven't been feeling very fit the last few days, so I don't think I will go find her right away."

Li Mubai watched as Shi lifted his head, as if he was thinking about something. The young man pretended to calm down, saying:

"Boss Shi, don't worry! This matter makes me angry, but I do not intend to annoy them or cause other incidents. And then, I still have a relative in the capital (12)."

Shi had paid his bond at the yamen, so Li Mubai was trying to reassure him. He didn't expect Fat Shi to slap his chest and exclaim:

"Whatever, Lord Li, do as you see fit! Whatever happens, I take full responsibility! I'll tell you, I'm not one of those cowardly traders!"

"I noticed it," added Li Mubai with a small smile.

The young man glanced at Shi the Fat; The latter smiled back at him, blinking his eyes. The two men understood each other perfectly.

Soon after, Li Mubai, sated, called out a "see you tonight!" To boss Shi before returning to the temple. In his room, lying on the kang, he thought back to Xianniang. He remained convinced that she had always felt a deep and sincere affection for him. There had indeed been a few little misunderstandings between them, but hadn't she said with great delicacy that she would wait for his return when he came to say goodbye to her? It clearly showed that she wanted to unite with him. He did not imagine that Fat Lu San and Lord Xu,



knowing the feelings of the young woman towards him, deployed such a ploy to have him thrown in prison and take the opportunity to get her back.

"You think I'll let myself be beat so easily!" he thought. "That I will leave the fragile Xianniang in the trap you set for her? If so, how could I still claim to be a brave man? What reputation could I hope to earn after this in Jianghu?" Seething with anger, Li Mubai would have liked to go immediately to the alley of the Maneuvering Field to meet Xianniang. But he felt tired, his head ached, so he preferred not to go out.

Lying on the bed, he removed from the scabbard the precious sword that young beile Tie had given him, and observed it closely. It was a truly remarkable weapon. When he raised his head to glance at his on the wall, he said to himself: "This is just a curiosity from the past. If I have to travel the world of Rivers and Lakes, I still prefer to use my own blade. She has been with me for so many years. It was with it that I followed the teaching of my master Ji Guangjie, with it that I took off the embroidered headband of Xiulian's during our duel; it is again thanks to it that I defeated He Jian'e, the Demoness, Wei Fengxiang, the One who surpasses Lü Bu, and triumphed over Feng Long, the Little Lance and Feng Mao the Golden Sabers. My reputation only depends on this sword, and no other."

Li Mubai lay down full length on the kang and considered with a sigh. Suddenly he straightened up, also hung the beile's sword on the wall and left. He went to the Half-South alley, to his uncle Qi Dianchen's place. He knocked on the front door. Laisheng quickly opened the door and greeted him respectfully.

"Lord Li, how come you haven't been seen in the past few days?" He asked in astonishment.

Li Mubai knew full well he knew the answer, so he just asked him:

"Is your master here?"

"Yes, he's talking to someone! Come in, Lord Li, please!"

"If my uncle entertains, I won't disturb him. Recently, I offended someone who unfairly accused me for revenge, and I stayed in jail for a while."

"Truly?" Laisheng exclaimed forcefully. "But what happened?"

"Your master must have heard about my case, which is now definitely settled. Fortunately, my friend the young Beile Tie was able to help me. I charge you to pass these words on to my uncle. Tell him not to worry anymore!"

Laisheng kept nodding his head.

"If the Beile Tie has helped you," he said, "there is indeed no need to worry anymore!"

"I'm still staying at Faming Temple," Li Mubai continued. "I plan to return to Nangong within a month. I'll be back in a few days!"

Li Mubai turned on his heel and walked out of the alley. He strolled for a moment on the avenue, his mind in the dark. His footsteps led him to the alley in the Maneuver Field. He looked for Fat Lu San's residence that Shi had described to him. A hatred mingled with jealousy seized him. He then had only one desire, to burst into the house and find Xianniang to ask her whether or not she had voluntarily married Lord Xu. He could also have grabbed Fat Lu San in the process and get revenge for what he had done to him.

Li Mubai was pacing up and down near the small entrance. The doors were securely closed and he saw absolutely no one come out. An idea suddenly crossed his mind. He stopped coming and going and turned around. Back at the temple, he felt dejected. Could it be possible that I am sick, he wondered. The thought discouraged him completely and he lay down to rest.

Night had already fallen when he awoke. He went to Shi the Fat's little tavern for dinner. There were many customers and Shi was very busy. Li Mubai could not converse with him. Melancholy, he returned to the temple and walked back and forth in the courtyard. It was the beginning of fall. In the deep midnight blue sky, not a single cloud floated. The crescent moon was shining. The stars

twinkled like the eyes of a watchful person. Plunged into darkness, the place where the tombs were stored under the two corridors gave goosebumps. The strident songs of the insects hidden between the bricks resembled so many comments on the torments of this lower world.

Li Mubai suddenly thought of young Yu Xiulian. He saw her smiling face, her eyes shining and her delicate figure appear to him under the glow of the moon. A feeling of admiration surged again in his heart. I am really stubborn. Xiulian's father is dead, and second son Meng has gone somewhere. Should this situation harm the young Xiulian for a long time to come? Since I still love her, why not go back to Old Guard Meng and Lady Yu to talk about marriage? Xiulian and I could finally start a family! Li Mubai was dying to go to Xuanhua's government right away, but he recovered. I have spent the past two months with Xie Xianniang expressing tenderness and affection to her, now I feel a little guilty towards Xiulian.

A sudden gust made him shiver. This marriage affair with Xiulian was decidedly impossible! He therefore had to do everything to find Meng Sizhao. Their union accomplished, he would finally be appeased and worthy of being a loyal and upright hero. Li Mubai observed the bright moon, heaved a long sigh of regret, and went back to his room. Without lighting, he closed the door and went to bed. From the window he still heard the chirping insects that seemed even more intense now. Li Mubai forced himself to quiet his thoughts and fell asleep without noticing.

He didn't know how long he had been asleep, but a quiet and unusual noise woke him with a start. He glanced through the paper window where pale moonbeams were unfurling. Outside, mingled with the songs of the insects, he again distinguished a very slight friction. Li Mubai immediately understood that someone was in the yard. He quickly climbed down from the kang, retrieved his sword from the wall, slowly opened the door and bounded out of the room. He distinctly heard a nearby breath but saw no one.

Li Mubai scanned the night all around, but saw only the slanted rays of the moon, the bright and sparse stars, and a few clusters of white clouds floating in the deep black sky. The noise was gone. The two corridors escaped the glow of the night star. Assuming the

thief had taken refuge behind the tombs, he walked towards them, sword in hand. No one was there, not even some ghost. Li Mubai then jumped onto the roof, but then again, he didn't see the slightest movement or the shadow of a burglar. As he was about to go back down to the courtyard, he saw a flash of light in his room through the paper window, as if someone had just turned on the lamp and then put it out. He darted off the roof just as the individual was leaving his room. The visitor raised his sword and rushed at Li Mubai, who retaliated while watching him. Modest in size, his face half hidden by a scarf, the intruder fought fiercely. Li Mubai smirked and fully engaged in the fight.

The two blades clashed with a crash. The two men were leaping all around. After more than twenty exchanges, Li Mubai's astonishment grew. The technique of his opponent was incredible, he had never met such an experienced opponent. Li Mubai changed his tactic, without slacking off, thinking he would gain the upper hand. The replicas of the man adapted without any harm. The gleams of the two blades continued to waltz, attacks and ripostes did not cease to follow one another. Their talent was such that it was impossible to know who would triumph over whom. Li Mubai wanted to block one of his attacks and take the opportunity to ask him who he was and why he had come to find him. But the intruder suddenly took a few steps back and jumped up on the roof, faster and more skillful than a cat.

"Friend, don't go!" Li Mubai exclaimed before chasing him.

The individual had already vanished.

Li Mubai, sword in hand, thought: Good, good! All in all, I didn't come to Beijing for nothing! I finally found an opponent in my size! He went back to his room, turned on the lamp and immediately noticed that the precious sword that the beile Tie had given him that very day was no longer hanging on the wall. As soon as he realized that the individual wanted the weapon, he was extremely happy. Even more so than when he had injured Wei Fengxiang, beaten Skinny Buddha Amida, or made Feng Mao, the Golden Sabers, bend. Li Mubai promptly closed his door, turned off the lamp and lay down. He fell asleep quickly, as if the visitor had allowed him to forget all his worries.

The next day, Li Mubai still felt dizzy. He went to an apothecary whose shop was nearby to buy a medicine ball, then went to Shi the Fat's tavern where he took the medicine with a little tea. He took the opportunity to chat a little with Shi, without revealing anything about his business from the day before. After a while, he took leave of the boss and hired a cart to go to the beile. He was not at the residence. Li Mubai thought of pushing to the stable to greet young Yu and talk to him, but he changed his mind. I'm not a guest of the beile, he told himself, yet his servants are very respectful to me. If I try to meet one of the servants, I will inevitably arouse suspicion.

Li Mubai paced the door of the residence, hoping to see Little Yu. After a long time, he resigned himself to seeing him on another day. He left the scene and headed south. Soon, Li Mubai felt that his feet were heavy and his head was still spinning. He hired a cart to return to the Prime Minister's Lane. At the temple, he immediately lay down and fell asleep. He didn't get up for lunch and didn't wake up until nightfall.

Li Mubai was not in good shape, he was bored and sighed continuously. No matter what may happen, I absolutely must see Xianniang tonight! When this matter is cleared up, I will finally stop making myself bad blood, I will be able to recover and then go to Yanqing to find De Xiaofeng.

He went to the tavern for dinner, chatted with Shi for a few moments, then returned to the temple. He turned on the lamp and lay down to rest for a while. He wished deep down that the thief from the day before would show up again. Despite his fatigue, he hoped to be able to measure himself once again against this masked individual with such remarkable technique. Li Mubai did not close his door. On the third day before, apart from the rustle of the autumn wind or the chirping of the insects, no suspicious sound was heard. It's time for me to gather my strength and pick myself up. I have to change. He put on his short black ensemble, tightened his belt correctly, and put on thin, light boots. He blew out the lamp, retrieved his overcoat and sword, then left the room. He watched the dark clouds in the sky.

Li Mubai wished he could fly to the alley in the Maneuvering Field to finally see Xianniang, whom he hadn't seen for so long. He

jumped onto the roof of his room, crossed the wall and found himself outside the temple. He glanced around; nobody. He put on his long overcoat under which he hid his sword and walked out north of the Prime Minister's lane to the Maneuver Field.

The streets were quiet in the middle of the night. Li Mubai walked through several small alleys without even encountering the shadow of a standby bell ringer. He quickly reached the entrance to the Gros Lu San residence. The doors were securely closed, so he walked over to the back wall. There he took off his overcoat which he rolled up and nestled under his arm. With a leap, he found himself on the wall. He walked slowly over the rooftops to reach the north wing. The courtyard was surrounded by three buildings, the northern and western parts were both lighted. Li Mubai lay face down on the roof of the north wing. After a while, delicate laughter arose in the night. He couldn't hear any male voice. The sounds grew sharper and a woman exclaimed:

"I'm going to bed. If you're not sleepy, wait for it!"

The familiar soft voice flew to Li Mubai's ears, making him feel sad and impatient.

Ya'e, who resided in the north wing, accompanied Xianniang back to the west wing. An elderly attendant came forward, lantern in hand, to light up the courtyard. Ya'e seemed to tease Xianniang:

"You're afraid to sleep alone!" she exclaimed. "You better stay with me and keep me company. Lord Lu San will pass in a moment, but that's okay!"

"What nonsense are you saying?" Xianniang grumbled with a confused smile. "Wait a little while Lord Xu arrives, that I repeat your words to him!"

Ya'e walked over and pulled Xianniang close to her.

"You would dare to tell him! Huh, would you dare?" she said. "If you tell him, I'll never let him come here again!"

Xianniang clapped her hands as she pulled away.

"Oh! Do you think! His Excellency Xu does not care about your opinion!"

She ran to the west wing. Ya'e chased after her, laughing, but Xianniang shut the door in her face.

"Big sister," she said, "stop a bit! It's getting late, I don't think Lord Lu San will come. You should also go to bed! Come on, see you tomorrow!"

After throwing a few more teasing and rude sentences, Ya'e caught her breath and walked back to the north wing, waddling her hips, accompanied by the old maid who closed the door behind her.

On the roof, Li Mubai was dismayed as much as he was downcast. I thought this marriage would have made her sad and melancholy; obviously, it has not. She even seems very satisfied with her lot. A woman's heart is truly unfathomable! Li Mubai was furious and thought to leave immediately, but he noticed that a lamp was still on in the west wing. He assumed that Xianniang's mother occupied another room. Lord Xu and Fat Lu San hadn't been through all day, leaving the two young women behind, and they found themselves in an empty residence teasing and having fun with each other. Fat Lu San and Lord Xu surely know that I have been released from prison, Li Mubai thought to himself. They suspect that I will never forgive them and no longer dare to venture here. A bound, the young man jumped off the roof and walked directly past the door to the west wing. Through the glass window, he saw Xianniang sitting by the lamp, melancholy, supporting her chin with her hands.

She was wearing a short bright pink ensemble. She was almost with her back to the lamp, which prevented Li Mubai from clearly seeing her face. He could not help feeling tender feelings towards her. He hooked his precious sword to his back, stepped forward and pushed open the door.

Leaning near the lamp, looking sad, as if plunged into deep torment, Xianniang suddenly heard someone at her door. Thinking of still dealing with Ya'e coming back to tease her, she raised her head with a frown and exclaimed at the end of her patience:

"Ya'e, big sister! So go to sleep already! We will meet again tomorrow! I'm really not in the mood tonight!"

Outside, Li Mubai tapped his finger lightly on the door and replied:

"Xianniang, open up! It's me!"

The young woman flinched with fear and straightened up instantly. Distraught, she said:

"Who... Who are you?"

From the tone of her voice, it seemed like she was reluctant to scream. Li Mubai opened the door from the outside and entered the bedroom.

Suddenly seeing a tall man approaching, dressed all in black, Xianniang was about to scream when she finally recognized Li Mubai. She immediately swallowed her cries and began to tremble all over her body. Her delicate face, lit by the dim light, gave only an expression of terror. With great dignity, eyes full of tenderness, Li Mubai addressed her:

"Do not be afraid!"

Still terrified, she lifted her face and asked piteously:

"Why did you come?"

Li Mubai bit his lower lip and stared at Xianniang for a long time. He finally said in a low voice:

"I wanted to talk to you!"

Finding that he did not appear angry, Xianniang calmed down.

"What have you to say to me, speak, I listen to you!"

"Fat Lu San and Xu the assistant minister have set a vile trap for me to imprison me, all so that you can more easily fall into their hands, did you know that?"



"Yes," Xianniang nodded, "I know everything. I also knew you were out of jail. Since then, they no longer dare to come here because they are afraid of you!"

"Fortunately they are not here," smiles coldly Li Mubai. "Otherwise, I think I would have killed them!"

Xianniang flinched at these words. She then saw the sword behind his back. He approached her and exclaimed:

"I, Li Mubai, am a good man. I cannot allow myself to be humiliated in this way, nor accept without reacting this marriage with old Xu. He already has two or three concubines! Go with me, we will leave Beijing tomorrow. No matter where we go, I will never let you suffer!"

Xianniang took a few steps back, frightened.

"I can't come with you! She said shaking her head."

As he wanted to hold her, he stopped short, frozen by these words. He hastened to ask her:

"Why don't you come? I find it hard to believe that you really want to be old Xu's concubine..."

"Not at all. I do not want it. But... His Excellency Xu has influence, money, and he treats me well, supports me and my mother. We cannot but be grateful. We can not..."

Xianniang burst into tears. All traces of fear had disappeared and she began to trample with rage:

"I couldn't marry you anyway. You Jianghu men cannot be good! I want to spend the rest of my life alongside Lord Xu. If you decide to kill him, you will also have my death on your conscience!"

Li Mubai's heart suddenly froze. The young man was stunned for a long moment, then finally nodded.

"Good! Since this is so, we have nothing more to say to each other. Forgive me, I was wrong about you. I'm leaving now!"

He turned on his heel and closed the door behind him. Only a rustle arose, followed by a slight sound of footsteps on the tiles. Li Mubai was gone. Xianniang knew that she would never be able to meet such a straightforward, loving and elegant man again. She regretted her attitude and thought she shouldn't have had such cold words. She leaned her head on the table and couldn't help but cry bitter sobs.

Li Mubai back at the temple was not particularly angry. He only felt regret and told himself that he shouldn't be fooled by his feelings any longer. I was in awe of Yu Xiulian before I found out that she was promised to Second Lord Meng. After leaving Xuanhua, all I had to do was find a job in the capital and stay in my place, or simply go wandering in the world of Rivers and Lakes. I should never have strolled through the Pleasure District and above all, I should not have behaved so sincerely with Xianniang. As Shi said, if I hadn't met her, Fat Lu San probably would never have conspired against me. Because of this meeting, I spent several days in prison and once I got out, I went back to see her again. No one understands the deep feelings I have for her, and to fill it, she is mocking me now. In the end, I only suffer the consequences of my actions. I can only blame myself if I find myself so humiliated! Li Mubai sighed. He had only one desire: to sink his sword into his chest. Restless until late at night, however, he eventually fell asleep.

## Chapter 19

*The autumn wind blows in the old sanctuary,*

*He takes care of the sick and befriends;*

*In the secret residence, blood is shed for a noble affair,*

*In the name of justice, tyrants are eliminated.*

The next day, Li Mubai felt even worse. His head was spinning and his legs were cotton. But he refused to stay in bed to rest. Gritting his teeth, he struggled to get out of his room and go to Shi's tavern. As soon as he walked through the door, he sat down silently, his hands supporting his head. Shi thought he was still tormenting himself because of Xianniang. He laughed at him:

"How are you? Did Lord Li finally see Cuixian?"

"Don't talk to me about that again!" Li Mubai answered at the end of his patience.

His head was sagging more and more towards the table. "You, such a great hero," Shi thought to himself, "how can you worry about such a small matter? Is there really no solution?" A smile on his face, Shi watched him for a while longer.

He suddenly banged his fist on the counter.

"Lord Li," he exclaimed. "So stop tormenting yourself and let me take care of this unfortunate story! What do you think? Do not worry about Gros Lu San at the six private banks any more, nor high official Xu. I'm only a keeper, but I can very easily get them to return Cuixian to you!"

Shi rested his arm on the counter and was looking at Li Mubai. His little smile seemed to mean: "If you dare me, I'm willing to risk it all for everything!"

Li Mubai, concerned about his headache, did not understand the

meaning of Shi's words.

"Leave me alone with this!" he said in a disapproving tone. "I am too tired today!"

Li Mubai stood up with a breath.

"I'm not staying, better that I go home!"

Dragging his feet, he left the tavern, went to buy himself some medicine balls and then returned to the temple. Once lying on the kang, he no longer had the strength to get up. He pulled the blanket towards him and fell asleep painfully.

He woke up feverish, as if from a nightmare. He was turning around, sighing, hoping to be able to fall asleep again, when suddenly someone beside him called out to him:

"Big brother Li!"

Li Mubai jumped. Standing near the kang was a person with a pale face and large eyes, wearing a lined black robe. It was Little Yu, the young man who served in the stables at the beile's residence and who had been able to anticipate his move.

Li Mubai straightened up, supporting himself with his hands.

"Big Brother Yu! He said to him, I was hoping to see you again. Yesterday, I went to the residence of the beile, but I did not find you. Sit down, please. Forgive me if I fail in all respects, but I am sick!"

"I realized that," replied young Yu respectfully. "When I walked into your room, you didn't even move. Big brother, you must not catch a cold, lie down, please!"

"I fully agree! I'll go back to bed! But Brother Yu, you, take a seat and let's take the time to chat. On the table, there is tea, make yourself at home!"

Young Yu nodded, then asked:

"What disease are you suffering from, big brother? Did you bring in a doctor?"

Li Mubai lay back down and put the pillow under his head. He observed Yu with a sigh.

"It shouldn't be a big deal, I just had to catch a cold. I didn't see a doctor, but I took medicine balls. By resting for a day or two, I will recover quickly."

Li Mubai then saw on the table the precious sword that had been stolen from him in the middle of the night. He smiles :

"Big brother Yu, the other day, when I was competing with the sword against the beile Tie, you warned him, exposing my attack. I immediately understood that you had mastered martial arts. It intrigued me, I questioned Delu who taught me your name. I regret that Lord Tie does not realize that he has by his side a man of such exceptional talents, unfortunately reduced to working in the stables. I want to talk to the Second Lord about it. Yesterday I visited him but was unable to get an audience."

"Big brother, you shouldn't tell him anything. This work in the stable, I wanted it. I have been at the residence for almost a year. Apart from my daily chores with the horses, I don't get involved in anything. Lately everyone is saying your big name. The other day, during the fight, I was very impressed by your dexterity and your technique so strange, to the point of completely forgetting what I had to do. Several people then complained about me, but I did not want to argue with them. I saw the sword that Lord Tie gave you and felt still more admiration. At night, I decided to go to the temple, first to ask you for advice on martial arts, but also to have the opportunity to see this sword again. I have examined it well now. It is undoubtedly a good sword, but it remains an antique and its edge is not well sharpened. And then, I thought you must regret it. Having nowhere to store it, I came to give it back to you this evening, with all my gratitude."

"This blade won't do me any good. I offer it to you for you to use. The other night, I recognized you even though your face was concealed. I was hoping to see you again the next day, but not to

get the sword back. Big brother Yu, to be honest, I left my home, but I haven't traveled Jianghu for a very long time. I have already had to face celebrities such as Wei Fengxiang, Huang Jibei or Feng Mao the Golden Sabers. To be honest, they weren't very good, and I didn't have much trouble defeating them. But the other night, during our clash, I really felt like I was in front of an opponent of my size. I was able to admire the mastery of your art, and I am delighted to be able to measure myself against you again."

Carried away by his elation, Li Mubai struggled to sit up. Unfortunately too weak, he could not stand up. He looked at young Yu and said:

"Big brother, I haven't asked you your name or where you come from yet."

At these questions, young Yu sighed.

"I am from Zhangjiakou (14)," he replied. "I lost my parents at a very young age, and found myself wandering the world of Rivers and Lakes. People call me Little Yu, or Yu-the-Second."

Li Mubai understood that he refused to reveal his true identity. He must certainly have a heavy past. For him to hide his real name in this way and find himself a servant in a princely residence, it is because he has other intentions or big trouble. This is our first meeting, if I question him he will probably not want to tell me anything. It is better to become his friend and ask him for explanations afterwards.

"I have nowhere to store this sword," Little Yu continued, "the best is yet to leave it here! When I need it, I'll come back and borrow it from you! Big brother, you're sick, I think it shouldn't be long before a doctor comes."

Li Mubai was extremely grateful for this attention.

"Good, good! But don't bother for me, brother. Shortly, I will ask one of the monks in the temple to send for someone. When you see Second Lord Tie, tell him I'm sick and will visit him when I'm better!"

"I will not miss it. Big brother, rest, I will leave you. I'll come back to see you tomorrow."

"Excuse me for not seeing you out!"

Little Yu nodded and left the room.

This Yu really looks like a decent person, Li Mubai thought to himself. If I can make a friend of him, I won't have lived for nothing. But I still do not understand why a man of such exceptional capacities, young moreover, remains of his own free will a stable servant! Still weak, he did not linger on the subject any longer. Shortly after, a monk came to see him. Li Mubai almost asked him to send for a doctor, but he gave up because no one could then go and get the remedies and prepare the decoction for him.

After the monk left, Li Mubai felt extremely dejected. He found himself bedridden, a stranger in this city, with no one near him. He said to himself: If, unfortunately, in this temple desolated by the autumn wind, I were to die, would there be someone who would care? He thought back to Yu Xiulian's sad situation, now alone, to the fickle Xie Xianniang, then to the misfortunes of his life: a thousand torments, grudges and bitter disillusion were linked in his heart. Li Mubai, yet so sturdy and tenacious, a hero capable of catching the dragon and defeating the tiger, felt weakened by illness and unable to overcome his grief. Tears began to fall on the pillow. The rays of sunlight passing through the window grew weaker and weaker. It was getting late. Li Mubai had not eaten all day. He would have liked to take a sip of water, but no one was by his side to bring it to his lips.

Completely downcast, with a heavy heart, he suddenly heard the sound of footsteps in the courtyard. It was Little Yu who was coming back. Li Mubai struggled to ask him:

"Big brother, can you pour me a bowl of water?"

Little Yu did so. While helping him to drink, he said to him:

"Big brother, don't call me that. I'm probably a few years younger

than you. Rather call me little brother. I just went to the princely residence," he continued. "The Second Lord Tie was not there, but I spoke to Delu. I told him that you were sick, that you were alone in the temple, with no one to take care of you, and that you had asked me to stay with you. Delu replied that since it was so, it was best that I watch over you, and that he would tell the Second Lord about it."

Li Mubai moaned and sighed.

"Little brother, we hardly know each other, how could I ask you to watch over me? I am sincerely embarrassed!"

"Don't be. Most of us who roam the Jianghu are lonely, without family or ties. The life we lead is hard. It is inevitable that we fall ill, so we can only count on mutual help. These fortuitous encounters sometimes lead to us becoming life-long sworn brothers!"

Little Yu spoke so fervently that Li Mubai did not know what to say.

He helped him finish his bowl of water. Seeing that it was not late, he came out and quickly returned accompanied by a doctor who checked Li Mubai and wrote a prescription. After the practitioner left, Little Yu went to buy the remedies. He took the opportunity to get a small clay stove, a terracotta pot, charcoal and rice. Little Yu boiled the decoction, gave it to Li Mubai to drink, then prepared a clear rice porridge for him. He looked after him until nightfall. Li Mubai, embarrassed to say the least, kept on apologizing. Little Yu, annoyed, said to him seriously:

"Big brother, don't be embarrassed! I don't mind being here. You need to get well. When you are healed, we will befriend each other, and then you will see what kind of friend I, Yu-the-Second, can be!"

As he spoke, the door suddenly opened and a stout man entered. With a strong Shanxi accent, he exclaimed:

"What! Lord Li, you are sick!"

Little Yu, who had taken the opportunity to light the lamp, found



himself face to face with the man. He found him rather short, and very big. He had a very round head, capped with a braid, and wore a cook's apron. Li Mubai exclaimed:

"Boss Shi, you see, I'm dying in this temple!"

"Lord Li, do not say anything, replied Shi the Fat. Who has never fallen ill? You young people, if you have a headache or a fever, it's never very serious, in two days you are back on your feet!"

"With all you have to do, how do you find the time to come and see me?"

"There is not a crowd at the tavern and my clerk can take care of it. These last days, you didn't seem well to me, I thought to myself that you must have fallen ill. And since you haven't been through all day, I got worried and here I am."

Li Mubai smiled at Little Yu. "You see, although without connections in Beijing, I have a good relationship with everyone. A day without seeing me and the boss is worried!"

Shi nodded several times, then looked at young Yu.

"Dear friend, what's your name?"

"My name is Yu," he replied, smiling.

"He's my little brother Yu-the-Second," Li Mubai said. "He is ten times stronger than me in martial arts! Yu, this is the boss Shi, he opened a little tavern in the alley just outside, he's an old friend!"

The two men greeted each other with a clenched fist in the other hand. Shi stared at him for a long time, then asked Li Mubai how he felt after taking the doctor's remedies. Little Yu answered for him:

"The doctor said it was okay. He needed to take some decoctions and he will have to rest for a long time."

"Certainly," agreed Shi. "Your brother Li, despite his talents at kung fu and his completely atypical character, has a too sensitive heart. Young men your age should avoid the charms of young women at

all costs."

Stunned, Little Yu immediately stared at Li Mubai with wide eyes. Li Mubai tried to interrupt Shi and prevent him from speaking, but the latter, shamelessly, continued:

"There is something even more terrible than feminine charm: heartache!"

Li Mubai, from his bed, began to reprimand him:

"Boss Shi, stop saying nonsense!"

"Come on, how could you cover it up?" Shi continued smiling. "Lord Li, I speak conscientiously. Seriously, didn't your illness break out because of Cuixian? She's just a prostitute, that's all! She wanted to marry Fat Lu San and Lord Xu, let her do as she wants! We, valiant men, with our talents we can very well marry several women. How can you spend your days tormenting yourself? You are only destroying yourself. Stop worrying about this inconstant whore! Lord Li, you are a reasonable person. Harden your heart and open your eyes: even without remedies, you will be much better!"

Shi was worried he'd gotten a little too carried away. Addressing Little Yu, he continued:

"I always say what I think. But know that I really worry about him, because Li Mubai is not only one of my loyal customers, he is also my friend!"

Little Yu nodded, without saying a word. In bed, Li Mubai laughed yellow:

"Boss Shi, you're all wrong. Certainly, I knew this courtesan well, but I have forgotten her for a long time already! My illness has absolutely nothing to do with any of this!"

"Sure!" Shi exclaimed. "Lord Li, now you need calm to get well, I don't want to argue with you. I'll go, I'll come back to see you tomorrow!"

He nodded to Little Yu, turned on his heel, and left.

Little Yu found Shi really unique, rather agile despite his stoutness. Noticing that he was paying close attention to the tavern owner, Li Mubai said to him:

"Don't mind him. He certainly has a strange behavior, I noticed it a long time ago, but he never wanted to admit anything in front of me!"

"I also noticed," replied Little Yu. "By his temperament and his way of walking, we see that he is a follower of martial arts."

"He surely has a lot to hide! As soon as I get better, I'll cook it a bit! Several things aroused my suspicions, I will have to talk to him about it calmly!"

Little Yu would have liked to know more about the story about courtesan Cuixian, Fat Lu San, and Assistant Minister Xu, but Li Mubai was extremely tired. Lying on the kang, his eyes closed, he no longer wanted to speak. It would of course have been improper to question him in this state. Little Yu then sat down to rest. In the room, the only lamp was dimly lit and not a sound arose. Moonlight appeared through the window. Only the small crackles of the insects reached them in a disparate way.

Li Mubai moaned several times. He was hot, his body aching. He half-opened his eyes and saw Little Yu, his head resting in his hands, looking concerned. His disheveled hair and ragged clothes made him look like a poor wretch. Who could have known that he possessed such an exceptional ability in martial arts?

Li Mubai sighed. How many heroes lead a wandering life on this earth? The fencing masters and the close guards of the beile obtain all clothing, board and lodging. Nobody pays attention to this talented Yu! He has a rather sophisticated language. He must certainly have quickly gained fame among the scoundrels of Jianghu. He probably wants to keep his past exploits a secret, and I couldn't bombard him with too many questions. However, he assumes his exceptional abilities in martial arts, and we see that he is someone irreproachable. We have only known each other for a short time, but the fact that he watches over me in this way is proof of a chivalrous and generous soul. Li Mubai felt boundless gratitude

and boundless respect for the young man.

"Little brother, it's getting late, get some rest too! I'm sorry, I only have two blankets, the bed is narrow, and the nights are starting to get chilly!"

Little Yu straightened up, cutting short what Li Mubai was going to offer him.

"I don't mind not having a blanket. We are only in autumn, it is not yet very cold. Tomorrow I'll bring my things here. Big brother, do you want some water?"

Little Yu poured him a bowl of lukewarm water and presented it to him. Soon after, he closed the bedroom door, blew out the lamp, and wrapped himself in one of the thin blankets to sleep.

The next morning, Delu went to see Li Mubai.

"The Second Lord has heard that you are sick. He's sending me to check on you and recommend his doctor. He is a famous man. I went to see him earlier to ask him to come and check you out. He has two more consultations to do and will come right after."

Full of gratitude, Li Mubai replied:

"I cannot thank the Second Lord enough for his kindness!"

"He also instructed me to tell you that if Lord Li needed money, let him say so without embarrassment. The Second Lord has planned several tens of liang of silver for you. He was afraid to offend you, so he did not dare to confide them to me."

"I still have enough money," replied Li Mubai. "The Second Lord really does me too much honor, I feel ashamed! Brother Yu is already helping me a lot. Ask if he can stay here for a few more days, provided there isn't too much work at the residence. I need someone to watch over me!"

"Don't worry about it," Delu replied, "I can make that kind of decision. Nothing prevents Little Yu from staying by your side. In any case, he is hardly active in the stables."

Delu spoke as if he were the grand steward of the princely residence. Little Yu listened to him calmly, expressionless. Li Mubai really didn't understand it. With his talent, why did he resign himself to being a valet in the stables and undergoing so much humiliation? Although he found it unfair, Li Mubai did not reveal anything about Little Yu's exceptional abilities. He nevertheless vowed to make Beile Tie look at him differently.

Delu took a seat and drank some tea while waiting for the doctor to finally arrive. He enjoyed a great reputation in Beijing and usually only visited princely residences, so his position was very high. In Li Mubai's cramped little room, he didn't even say a word. He took his pulse, dutifully wrote a prescription and left. Delu accompanied him back to the entrance to the monastery. He then glanced at the prescription. The bill was going to be steep.

"I will take the prescription with me, the princely residence has an account at the Longue Vie pharmacy."

"It won't be worth it," replied Li Mubai. "I'll tell Little Yu to take care of it."

Delu returned the prescription to him.

"Well," he said, "I am not lingering!"

"Present my thanks to the beile!" Li Mubai concludes.

With that, Delu left.

"The Second Lord Tie treats you very well," exclaimed Little Yu. "Delu is his personal servant, sending him so far to see you is a great mark of respect on his part."

"When I was in prison, he sent Delu to see me several times. Brother Yu, he continued with a sigh, I don't understand you! With your talents, you don't have to worry, you will always stand out from the crowd! Why do you want to remain a simple lackey in the stables of the beile's residence?"

Faced with insistent but sincere questions from Li Mubai, Little Yu just bowed his head with a sigh. After a while he straightened up

and said:

"I don't want to lie to you big brother, I, Yu-the-Second, have been roaming Jianghu since I was a child, and I no longer yearn for this kind of wandering life now."

"Exactly," replied Li Mubai, "why not reveal your talents to the beile? He knows how to appreciate people gifted in martial arts. If he recognizes your dexterity, I'm sure he will make you one of his personal guards. How can you not prefer that to your current position?"

"The time has not come, because it would be too easy to find me."

"Hey! So by staying in the stables, you keep yourself hidden!"

Little Yu nodded. Li Mubai was reluctant to ask him what was forcing him to go into hiding like this.

"Big brother," sighed Little Yu, "now that you understand, don't ask me more. I have a case that weighs on my heart, but I have not broken the law in any way. I am waiting for the favorable moment which will allow me to leave for other countries."

"Brother, as soon as I get better, I intend to go to Yanqing. I have friends there waiting for me, De Xiaofeng, the Iron Hand, as well as Yang Jiantang, the Divine Lance. What if you come with me? We will find an escort guard job there! What do you think?"

"Impossible!" Replied Little Yu.

Li Mubai found his behavior more and more strange. He wanted to ask him for clarification, but Little Yu straightened up abruptly, grabbed the prescription and said:

"I'll get you the remedies."

"Take some money, you'll find a few more liang in my purse."

"It's not worth it, I have enough!" Replied Little Yu before leaving.

This unusual character really puzzled Li Mubai. Shortly after, Little

Yu returned with the remedies. He installed the small stove under the awning and prepared the decoctions. After taking his medicine, Li Mubai fell sound asleep. Little Yu returned to the beile's residence to collect his blankets.

The next day, Li Mubai's uncle sent his servant Laisheng to see him. He had learned that he was ill and sent him some liang of money. In the evening, Fat Shi's employee brought him rice porridge.

Surrounded by all these caring people, Li Mubai did not feel sad or alone. However, lying like this all day doing nothing, many thoughts crossed his mind. He thought back to Yu Xiulian and Xie Xianniang. If he started thinking about them, then he felt deep remorse. "All of these stories are a thing of the past," he told himself, "but these experiences have devastated my heart. No matter what happens, I swear I'll never be intimate with a woman again. I can teach Little Yu or roam alone, now I will do whatever I want, it's so nice!"

Several days passed thus. Li Mubai was slowly recovering, but his body was still weak. Little Yu took care of everything from boiling water to preparing meals. For several days now, Shi the Fat's clerk had not shown up. Only the beile Tie sent someone daily to bring him all kinds of tonics, swallows' nests and white tremelles.

The weather had cooled down. One day of light rain, young Yu had returned the stove to his room. He was preparing food while chatting with Li Mubai who felt less alone. Suddenly they heard someone call from the court:

"Is Lord Li at home?"

The voice was unfamiliar to them. Little Yu hurried to open the door. An officer appeared. He put his umbrella aside and placed it against the wall before entering. Li Mubai immediately recognized one of the yamen guards. It was one of the men who arrested him and took him to jail. This time he was very cordial and asked him:

"Lord Li, have you been out recently?"

Li Mubai knew that the matter had to be important for this officer

to move in the rain. He answered as calmly as possible:

"I've been sick for several days! I am treating myself and just starting to recover, but I am still bedridden. Brother, why are you coming to find me today?"

The officer sat down on the kang. He took a small pipe from his pocket and began to smoke it. While glancing at the remedies on the table and in the small stove, he noticed Li Mubai's very ill face. He smiled and nodded.

"But for nothing special," he replied. "In the past few days, have you seen the Second Lord Tie?"

"Luckily, he takes care of me. He sends me an emissary every day and it is he, again, who asked the doctor to come by."

"The Second Lord Tie has always been a generous person!" The officer nodded. After a moment of reflection, he asked:

"Lord Li, do you know about Fat Lu San and Assistant Minister Xu?"

Surprised, Li Mubai shook his head.

"I do not know them!" He replied.

The officer said calmly:

"Lord Li, yesterday night Fat Lu San and Assistant Minister Xu were together at their residence in the Maneuver Field alley. A man then entered their home, a knife in his hand, and killed them both!"

Li Mubai changed color, stunned.

"After murdering them," the officer continued, "the murderer fled without taking any business. This proves without the slightest doubt that this is a story of revenge. As soon as we heard the news, we ran there and arrested Fat Lu San's concubine, Liu Ya'e, and Lord Xu's concubine, Xie Cuixian, as well as her mother. They were taken to the yamen for questioning. This Liu Ya'e clearly involves you in this matter."



Li Mubai couldn't contain his anger.

"Don't tell me this woman accuses me of killing Fat Lu San and Lord Xu!"

"Lord Li," replied the officer, waving his hand, "do not worry, you cannot be charged in this matter. Ya'e told us about your hatred for Fat Lu San, especially when you were released from prison. She also told us that Fat Lu San didn't dare go to the residence lately, for fear of running into you. Yesterday evening, it was Ya'e and Cuixian who had asked them to come. Who could have imagined that such a thing would happen in the middle of the night? The murderer was a stout person, dressed all in black from head to toe. It was seen by everyone, even by the servants."

Li Mubai was even more stunned. He finally said with an icy smile:

"Fortunately I am not fat!"

"We all know in the yamen," the officer continued, "no one would dare suspect you. Only Ya'e mentioned your name, Lord Li, and my superiors had to send someone to question you to hear your version."

"What could I tell you," said Li Mubai coldly. "Fat Lu San has wronged me and I hate him deeply. But I'm not the type to stoop to such outrageous behavior. To assassinate him in the middle of the night, I would have been incapable of it. Besides with this illness which has been going on for several days already, where could I have found the strength to kill someone? If you don't believe me in yamen, then go and ask the doctor who was recommended to me by the beile Tie and ask him if I have any illness or if I am faking."

The officer smirked.

"I told you, no one in the yamen would dare to suspect you!"

"If so, why come and question me? Fat Lu San and Lord Xu have never ceased to take advantage of their power and wealth, stopping at nothing. Who can say how many people have suffered their malice? I have a relative in the capital, I wouldn't have risked my

life facing them, but that doesn't mean other people wouldn't!"

Li Mubai was filled with indignation. Then, realizing that Lu San and Xu had just been murdered, he felt almost jovial. To the officer, it was obvious that Li Mubai had nothing to do with this matter. He stayed a moment longer and then left them.

After his departure, Li Mubai addressed Little Yu:

"You see, luckily I'm sick, otherwise I would have been unjustly accused of these crimes!"

"No," replied Little Yu, "the witnesses clearly said it: the murderer was stout!"

Li Mubai smiled slightly, then, lost in thought, finally nodded without adding anything. Little Yu asked him:

"Was it this Cuixian, the concubine of Xu the assistant minister, that you were dating?"

At the question, Li Mubai, ashamed, sighed.

"Little brother, what we should avoid the most is friendship with women. Over the past few months, I have been able to experience all possible suffering. My ambitions have dried up. Unfortunately, these difficulties have arisen in quick succession. All of these misfortunes are due to weaknesses I experienced for two young women. I only understand it now and deeply regret it. I'll explain."

Little Yu had wanted to know his friend's experiences for a long time. A smirk immediately appeared on his face and, all ears, he sat down on the edge of the kang. Li Mubai gave a faint smile and began his story:

"This year I encountered two obstacles to love. The first young woman was from the district of Julu, next to mine; she has the same last name as you!"

These words seemed to petrify Little Yu. His face changed color. His large, bright and expressive eyes looked bewildered. His interest redoubled. Li Mubai paid no attention and continued to tell his

loving story with Yu Xiulian. As his despair for this love gradually faded, he had met the courtesan Cuixian. He had thus become the enemy of Fat Lu San and Lord Xu, who had found a way to throw him in prison. Totally dejected, he had fallen ill because of these two stories. He confided at length and ended up adding that he would not be taken back to provoking the demons of love.

Little Yu didn't pay much attention to Xianniang's story, only the one about Yu Xiulian seemed to bother him. Thoughtful, he smiles.

"To hear you, Brother Li, you and young Xiulian got along well together!"

His feelings not being completely extinguished, Li Mubai sighed:

"I'm almost thirty years old. If I haven't gotten married so far, it's because I was waiting to meet a talented young woman like Xiulian. Unfortunately, since she has already been engaged to someone for a long time, I no longer have any illusions. I will do my best to find Meng Sizhao, so that the two can finally get married. I will then be somewhat comforted. As for me, after this other adventure with Xianniang, I take an oath never to consider getting married again!"

"Big brother," smiled Little Yu coldly, "what is the point of being so obstinate? Since this Meng Sizhao has left his home and is wandering around who knows where, what harm would it be if you marry this Xiulian?"

"I, Li Mubai, am an inexperienced person and I find it difficult to let go of these feelings, but you can be sure that I would not dare to do such an unworthy thing! Even if Meng Sizhao does not reappear or it is learned that he is no longer of this world, I will never be able to marry Yu Xiulian. I prefer to stay single all my life!"

"You are really too stubborn!" Exclaimed Little Yu, still smiling coldly.

He straightened up and walked out of the room. Under the awning he looked into the distance; in the courtyard, the autumn wind was blowing gently. The young man took a long time before entering the room.

In the evening, Little Yu prepared the meal. After recovering, the two men lit the lamp and chatted face to face. Li Mubai again insisted that he not underestimate himself and fall into poverty. Young people, especially when they are talented, should think about finding a teacher.

"If young Beile Tie treats you with indifference at the moment, it's because he doesn't know you," Li Mubai explained to him. "Hearing that your art equals mine, he will immediately see you as someone worthy of interest."

"I do not want to deploy my talent to attract favors. In addition, I have already changed my plans: I will leave Beijing as soon as you get well!"

"Where are you going to go?"

"I would like to go to Jiangnan," hesitated Little Yu, "to see a friend."

"Great! I have long wanted to take a walk there! Originally from Zhili Province, I was actually born in Jiangnan. I have an uncle by marriage, the famous knight errant Jiang Nanhe who I must visit! Brother, wait for my recovery and let's go south together. What do you say?"

Little Yu refused.

"Big brother, we are very different. I am alone and wherever I go I am at home, I am free to do whatever I want. You still have your uncle in your native country. After you arrived in Beijing, your reputation grew every day and your friends became more numerous, I hope you will not give up everything. Later, you could set up a small business here, and then start a family with young Yu Xiulian. Why go against aspirations? As for me, Yu-the-Second, I am struck by misfortune. I can do nothing about it, I am reduced to wandering like this!"

Li Mubai looked unhappy, especially when Little Yu mentioned Xiulian's name again. Despite the time spent together, he found that Little Yu always kept his distance. He had told him his life in detail,

even a few secrets, but his new friend didn't seem to have told him even a single truthful sentence about his existence. He just knew his name was Yu and that he was the second in his line, without even knowing his first name. If only he was indifferent, but no, he had watched over him sincerely and very carefully. He was really confusing, impossible to pin down.

The rain continued outside the window. Under the awning, the drip of water created a rhythm that encouraged calm as much as torment. The two dull slats hung on the wall, the light from the lamp still flickering slightly. Li Mubai felt extremely weary. About to ask Little Yu to close the door to sleep, he jumped up. While gesturing to Li Mubai, he retrieved one of the swords. Li Mubai then strained his ears and heard a very subtle sound of footsteps in the courtyard. With Little Yu by his side, he was not worried and found it unnecessary to get up.

Little Yu pulled the blade out of its scabbard. He was about to push the door when a loud burst of laughter arose.

"Who's there?"

"It's me!" A man with a heavy Shanxi accent exclaimed from outside.

The man entered. He was dressed in short black clothes and wearing a skullcap. By the dim light of the lamp, Li Mubai and Little Yu quickly recognized Shi the Fat. He didn't seem as obese as before. His movements were quick and agile. Li Mubai sat up on the kang and said to him with a smile:

"Boss Shi, today you finally show yourself in your true light!"

"Lord Li, he replied with a smile, there has always been a tacit understanding between us. If I'm coming to see you today, it's to say goodbye to you!"

Li Mubai, surprised at first, said mischievously:

"You are really good! You kill Fat Lu San and Lord Xu, then get out of here! Do you know that today a yamen officer came to see me?"

"No, but don't be afraid, now the young Beile Tie is protecting you. Even if you did commit an offense, you wouldn't have to worry! Lord Li," he continued while resting his buttocks on the kang, "I have something to tell you. I'm going to reveal my name to you, you've probably heard it before. I am Shi Jiang, 'the Serpent that climbs the Mountain,' from Shanxi. I roamed for several years in the Taihang mountains, where I accomplished many recognized feats!"

Little Yu realized that he had in front of him Shi Jiang, the famous knight errant of Shanxi. He could not believe his eyes.

"Two years ago," Shi continued, "I had a clash with some friends from Jianghu. They set a trap for me and all joined forces against me to correct me. With my disciple, I fled from Shanxi to Beijing, where I opened the small tavern. I thought I would live a few years like this and stop traveling the Rivers and Lakes fighting for supremacy. Only, I had not planned to meet you, friend. I really admire your talent! I was furious when Fat Lu San and Huang Jibei attacked you. I came to deliver you from prison, thinking that you would run away with me in Jianghu. But you are much smarter than me; you refused to become a fugitive by escaping and preferred to wait for the Beile Tie to save you. Since this story, I no longer thought to mind your business."

"The fact that your employee brought me the file," exclaimed a recalcitrant Li Mubai, "and that you come in the middle of the night to release me was indeed ingenious. Only, you did not take into account that I had a relative and friends in the capital: how could I have followed your plan?"

"I absolutely do not blame you," replied Shi, "you can see it. Since I started trading, I have gained a lot of weight. I wouldn't even be able to climb the walls if I didn't put a wide belt around my waist!"

He then unbuttoned his shirt and showed them the large strip of black fabric that hugged his chubby body. Li Mubai couldn't help but chuckle. Little Yu changed the candle.

Solemnly, Shi slapped his chest and said:

"I swear I had decided not to take care of other people's business

anymore. But this Lu San despot, abusing his power and influence, stopping at nothing, I had long awaited the opportunity to eliminate him. When he unfairly threw you in prison and took the opportunity to recover Cuixian, making you suffer, you such a great hero, that was too much! So I went to the alley in the Maneuver Field the other night and murdered those vicious Lu San and Xu. Cuixian is now a widow, how could she not marry you?"

Li Mubai, red with anger, growled:

"It's absurd!"

"I'm not asking you to return the favor," Shi replied. "Anyway, my dirty habits have resurfaced. I know the yamen is already after me, I can't stay in Beijing any longer, I'm leaving tonight. But I wanted to tell you one more thing: do not think that Huang Jibei is a good person! I heard that it wasn't just Fat Lu San involved in your arrest, and that Huang Jibei was very involved in it. It was not three days since the Fifth Lord De had returned from his mission when he forced him to leave Beijing. I also learned that he was in cahoots with the Feng brothers, and that they had sent Mao Baokun, an escort guard from the Sihai agency, to Henan to look for Miao Zhenshan, the Fish that swallowed the Boats, as well as Zhang Yujin, the Golden Spear. Huang Jibei invited them to come to the capital to challenge you in a duel to the death. I'm warning you, you'll have to be very careful. Zhang Yujin and his spear, Miao Zhenshan and his darts, Huang Jibei and his dagger hidden behind his smiles are not tender ones. I couldn't help you."

Shi the Fat smiled at them and greeted them respectfully with folded hands.

"Fine, I'm leaving. See you later!"

He went. Nothing was heard but the noise of a tile; he had slipped away.

Li Mubai laughed out loud and said to Little Yu:

"Brother, you said that my fame was great, it ended up attracting me a lot of jealousy! You just heard it, Huang Jibei instructed a

man named Mao to bring in Zhang Yujin and Miao Zhenshan. Old guard Yu had already mentioned this Zhang Yujin's name. On the other hand, this Miao Zhenshan is unknown to me. I can't wait to meet them! It's perfect, when they arrive, I'll be back on my feet. Sacred Huang Jibei, he muttered. When I was in prison, you even came to see me, you really are a dirty hypocrite! Well, I'll be looking forward to the fight!"

Beside him, Little Yu was silent, as if he wasn't really paying attention to this story. He closed the bedroom door and went to bed. Li Mubai brooded over this hateful affair with Huang Jibei and thought, amused, of Shi. Little Yu's actions seemed more and more suspicious to him.

Five or six days passed. Li Mubai was doing much better. Little Yu returned to live in the stable of the Beile's residence and did not come back. One morning, Li Mubai put on a quilted silk jacket, put on a hood, and left the room. He took full force of a gust of wind that pierced his bones. He shivered. The yard was already strewn with dead leaves. He then felt like a literate wanderer who would have let his youth slip away. He casually exited the temple and crossed the Prime Minister's Alley. He walked past Shi's tiny tavern, whose closed doors looked like a tomb. Li Mubai dared not linger, lest someone recognize him as a close friend of Shi the Fat. He hurried to hire a vehicle to get to the Anding gate, to the beile's residence.

In front of the house, the doormen begged him to enter. He waited in a small reception room until the young beile Tie, Little Mustaches, received him. As soon as he saw him, the beile exclaimed:

"How thin you have become!"

Li Mubai only smirked and sat down facing him. The latter insisted again:

"Are you really healed?"

"Yes," Li Mubai nodded. "After a few days of rest, I will definitely be back. Fortunately, the beile took care of my health and that the



younger brother Yu took good care of me."

"Little Yu," agreed the beile, "is an honest child. But I heard he was a bit of a draw."

Li Mubai wanted to defend him and reveal the talents of the young man, but the beile continued:

"Mubai, I was hoping for your quick recovery! I don't know if you know about it, but Huang Jibei sent someone to Henan, to pray to Miao Zhenshan, the Fish that swallowed the Boats, and Zhang Yujin, the Golden Spear, to come to Beijing to challenge you."

Li Mubai, without showing the slightest surprise, replied:

"Second Lord, who do you get this from?"

"The other day, I met Qiu Guangchao, the General with the Silver Lance. He was the one who told me about it. This story outraged me. I went to ask Huang Jibei for an explanation, but he didn't confess. He told me that he had no disagreement with you and that you had never beaten him up. He even told me to be your friend and to have visited you in prison!"

"Huang Jibei has repeatedly wanted to take advantage of a friendship between us, but it never existed! Who knows what he's up to? I just recovered and I'm not afraid of them. I was thinking of going to Yanqing, but this news forces me to stay. I await the arrival of these two to know what they are worth!"

"Well said," exclaimed the beile, "showing all his anger. I hope you will do me honor!"

The two men were silent for a moment. Suddenly the beile sighed:

"In the capital, people can be treacherous! If a newcomer has some qualities, he is immediately the butt of jealousy. If you hadn't known me and De Xiaofeng, who knows how many people would already have plotted against you? Recently there was a terrible incident - you were very ill and I did not want to send someone to let you know. Fat Lu San and Assistant Minister Xu were both murdered in their second home. Their wives clearly saw that the

murderer was stout. They often used their power to abuse people. Their enemies were numerous. Only, it seems that Huang Jibei took the opportunity to harm you, because he went to the yamen to say that you were responsible. Governor Mao came to talk to me about this matter. I told him that you were currently ill and that I vouched for you without hesitation and the story did not follow."

Li Mubai informed him that a yamen officer had visited him while he was still in bed. He ends up being indignant:

"Before arriving in the capital, I had already heard of Huang Jibei's fame, and of course, I held him in high esteem. I could never have imagined that he was just a scoundrel with a treacherous heart beneath an amiable exterior. I must ask him why he is so insistent on conspiring against me."

Li Mubai was flushed with rage.

"You shouldn't go see him," retorted the beile. "You're barely well, don't go get angry again. Besides, he certainly won't receive you. Since your release from prison, he has hardly left his home. After this double murder, he will remain holed up. Take care of him and that's it!"

Li Mubai remained silent, but did not take a break. He remained chatting with the beile for a moment, then took his leave. He went to the stable to see Little Yu, but according to those who worked with him, he had gone out the night before and still hadn't come back. Li Mubai was surprised at this news. He hired a cart to return south of the city. He wondered: Why do I only meet weird people? I spent over a month continually suspecting Shi, and despite his good intentions, his help almost ended in death. I find Little Yu even stranger than Big Shi and still don't know what he's up to! The cart picked up speed. After Qianmen, it quickly arrived on the avenue of the Mules and Horses Market.

Li Mubai had not lowered the curtain of the car, wanting to take a look at the passing passers-by, as well as the shops on both sides of the avenue. Someone suddenly called him:

"Lord Li! Lord Li!"

He saw a woman of about fifty. Looking more closely, he recognized Lady Xie, Xianniang's mother. She was wearing a short jacket lined with an old satin fabric and seemed all curled up in the cold. She was holding a bag of medicines in her hand. Li Mubai stopped the cart and said:

"What are you doing here?"

Dame Xie bowed before approaching the cart.

"We moved with Cuixian. We now live with an old aunt, in the alley of the pink houses of Liuli. Xianniang thinks of Lord Li every day, to the point of falling ill! If you are not in a hurry, come and rest with us for a while: what do you say?"

Lady Xie was begging him in a truly pitiful way.

Li Mubai had just understood. When Lord Xu died, the two women were left with nothing. He thought he would never see Xianniang again. He remembered when he still lived at Yuanfeng Hostel. Once, at the entrance to Xiheyuan, he encountered the mother and daughter who waved to him from their cart. At that time, Xianniang was very attached to him. It was just a few months ago. Then came Xianniang's disappointment, hardship and incomprehensible rejection. Now she found herself fallen and miserable. Her mother was now begging him to visit them. If he didn't go to see her to comfort her a little, not only would he show contempt, but also some inconstancy.

"Fine," he nodded, "let's go see her!"

Li Mubai got out of the cart and paid the driver. He followed Lady Xie to the northern entrance of the alley where they lived.

She looked delighted and straightened up a bit.

"Lord Li, it is certain that you and Xianniang have a predestined affinity. Since you left, she has no taste for anything and does not wear makeup. She even had a fight with the boss of the brothel and we had to move. Thanks to the support of her aunt, she was able to find another place to earn some money. But this child only weeps

and declares that she no longer wants to eat. She is only waiting for the return of Lord Li!"

Li Mubai, annoyed, found Lady Xie's words laughable. What a treacherous madam you are! You are careful not to tell me everything. Do you really think I didn't know? However, I have a doubt listening to you. Could it be possible that you are actually inviting me in the hope of getting Xianniang married? Not to mention the matter with Lord Xu, Xianniang has not been honest and sincere with me... I will never be able to have feelings for her again.

Lady Xie walked east of the alley and stopped at a dilapidated doorway with open doors.

"Come in, Lord Li," she said. "This is where we stay, but please don't laugh!"

Li Mubai passed the entrance and entered a small, cramped courtyard littered with fallen leaves and stagnant water. Clothes, a jacket and trousers of a faded red were drying in the sun on a cord. In the six or seven rooms, disorder reigned. It was evident that several families were residing there. Seeing that Lady Xie was bringing a visitor back, frivolous young women with disheveled hair opened their doors to look outside. Li Mubai soon realized that all these girls were prostitutes. Lady Xie walked to the west wing. Once in front of a small room, she unfolded the paper doors and begged Li Mubai to enter.

## Chapter 20

In the narrow alley, the withered flower

Look back with melancholy on her sweet broken dreams;

Under the icy wind, it retains all its nobility,

But does not waver, despite a resurgence of tenderness.

Li Mubai entered the room frowning. An odor of medicine and mustiness immediately seized him. The room only consisted of a kang, on which was spread a mat. Xianniang slept soundly under a red satin blanket. Li Mubai recognized the fabric he had given her. On the pillow appeared some disheveled hair. Lady Xie approached and started to stir her daughter:

"Cuixian! Cuixian! Look who's here!"

Xianniang gave a low moan and lifted her head slightly. Surprised, she saw Li Mubai. With a touch of resentment, she said:

"You came! Lord Li, see what has become of me! You must be happy now!"

Her face, both red and swollen, bore traces of tears mixed with bloodstains. Her eyes were still so graceful and sad, but expressed hatred. She hid her face and began to sob bitterly. Beside her, her mother was also crying. Li Mubai understood that after Lord Xu's assassination, the yamen arrested her and interrogated her under torture. The blows suffered explained her bruised face. He thought: I cannot say that I have nothing to do with the murder of Lord Xu since it was Shi who killed him. His death is not a big loss, but for poor Xianniang to fall so low is hard to bear. He sighed and moved closer to her.

"Xianniang, don't blame me," he said. "I could never have imagined that Fat Lu San and Lord Xu would be murdered. I have been ill for over two weeks, and even now I am not fully recovered."

"How could I blame you! she replied. Only... "

She turned suddenly to her mother.

"Mom, go out for a while, I would like to talk to Lord Li!"

Lady Xie wiped away her tears and left them. Xianniang, indignant, was irritated in a low voice:

"Lord Li, I know it was not you who killed them, but would you dare to assert that you do not know the murderer?"

Li Mubai was surprised at these words.

"Even though I knew him, what next? When Lord Xu died I was terribly ill, where would I have found the strength to incite someone to commit this crime?"

Xianniang gave a forced chuckle:

"You may not have instigated anyone, but this fat guy, you know him, he personally told me that you were a good friend of his. If I had said so in court, it is unlikely that my face would have been marked this way. In short, know that I am not just a prostitute and that I remain unpredictable. I have already suffered a lot and resign myself to my fate. I hope you are doing well, and that's it."

She wiped her tears from the corner of the blanket and continued:

"I have known for a long time that it is better not to hang out with Jianghu men, and that's why I got married to Assistant Minister Xu."

She thought back to her painful past and started to cry again.

Li Mubai, stunned, said:

"What are you saying to me, all this time you took me for a Jianghu man?"

He straightened up, annoyed. He found Xianniang pitiful.

"I'll try to explain, but it might not be very clear. Just because I

practice martial arts doesn't make me a Jianghu man! In fact, most men in this business hate me the most. I have beaten up several despots and bandits of the Rivers and Lakes. Last summer, on my way to Beijing, several bandits wanted to compete with me and I crushed them all. They took a grudge against me and spread the rumor that a bandit from the Rivers and Lakes was about. Fat Lu San and Huang Jibei took the opportunity to accuse me unfairly to the authorities and I nearly lost my life. Even now, Huang Jibei doesn't want to leave me alone. Soon, Miao Zhenshan, the Fish that swallowed the Boats, and Zhang Yujin, the Golden Spear, will be arriving from Henan to duel against me!"

Xianniang suddenly raised her head. Her eyes widened, trembling in all her limbs.

"What are you saying? Miao Zhenshan?"

"He's the most famous bandit in Henan," Li Mubai agreed. "Of course, you must not understand what I'm telling you. You must know that I am an honest man, in love with justice and righteousness. I practice martial arts, and if I'm fighting it's just because I don't want to be humiliated like the other night! I understood that you had married of your own free will to Lord Xu. When you explained it to me, I left immediately, without saying anything. If you still think that I organized this murder out of jealousy, you are really mistaking me!"

The news of Miao Zhenshan's arrival terrified Xianniang to the point of losing her mind. She didn't listen to Li Mubai's explanations. Her tears kept falling. She saw the vile face of Miao Zhenshan again, heard his brutal voice, felt the pain of the whip on her skin. She thought back to the tragic death of her poor father from the blows of sticks and realized that she was about to die. She knew that once he arrived, Miao Zhenshan would not show the slightest indulgence towards her and her mother.

Lady Xie then reappeared in the room. Her daughter was crying and Li Mubai, his brow furrowed, looked furious. Lady Xie's tears also began to flow. Li Mubai looked at her and said:

"What are you planning to do now?"

Dame Xie did not have time to answer. Xianniang exclaimed:

"How to worry about the future? We will both be dead soon!"

Lady Xie sobbed even more. Wiping her eyes and nose, she implored Li Mubai:

"We are not going to hide our situation from Lord Li any longer. Cuixian married Assistant Minister Xu. A month had not passed before he was murdered by a bandit, and, poor us, we still spent several days in prison. Cuixian's health has always been fragile, how could she have taken the slaps they gave her at the yamen? All of our jewelry and belongings were collected by the people of the residence. They left us nothing. What could we do? We ended up living with our aunt. But she maintains a lot of other girls and doesn't allow us to stay here too long. On the other hand, what is the point of looking for another accommodation to earn a little bit of a living, as long as Xianniang's face is in this state? Not to mention where we could find the money to relocate and buy clothes and furniture? We have no other way but to invite Lord Li and remind him of his past benevolence to save us both!"

These words distressed Li Mubai.

"As in the past, I can try to find a solution," he said at last. "I can of course ask friends to lend you money. This will allow you to hold out for a while while waiting for Xianniang to recover a bit. She will have to quickly marry a suitable party that assures you of sufficient resources and you will no longer have any reason to return to a brothel!"

As soon as Lady Xie heard that he was going to lend them money, she exclaimed:

"Aïya! Who cares who you ask. With a means of subsistence, who could still place her daughter in an establishment! Lord Li... "

She was going to insist that he marry Xianniang, but Li Mubai had already released two notes.

"Take that already. In a few days, you will come to see me at the



Faming temple, I will have prepared several tens of liang of silver for you. I'm better but I prefer not to go out too much, so I won't be staying here again. Take good care of her!"

He looked at Xianniang again. She was lying on her back, staring into space. Tears rolled down her bruised cheeks, like a delicate damaged flower. She looked so sad. Li Mubai had to push back the tender feelings that kept resurfacing. He sighed for a long time.

"I am going!" He finally declared.

Lady Xie walked him back to the entrance. Without looking back, he stepped out of the alley. Along the avenue of the Mules and Horses Market, he found a small stall where he could eat and drink. He heard one of the customers say:

"The business in the little tavern west of here was going well, how come Fat Shi abandoned it?"

People did not know that Shi was linked to the assassination of Fat Lu San and Lord Xu. Where can he be now? Li Mubai thought to himself. If he hadn't had to run away because of this affair, I wouldn't feel so alone now!

He finished eating and left the small restaurant. In the whisper of the autumn wind, he returned to Faming Temple.

Li Mubai constantly thought about Xianniang's sad situation. He had made up his mind to help them by finding some money to meet their needs. This he could do. He could take care of them while Xianniang recovered from her injuries. And he would refuse to talk to them about the marriage matter or deal with it. Now he had only two ideas in mind. He wanted, on the one hand, to discover Little Yu's secret and to know what kind of man he was. On the other hand, he hoped to quickly regain his strength, while awaiting the arrival of Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin. Between his precious sword and them, we could see who would win.

The next day, the autumn wind was blowing even harder. In the early morning, Li Mubai started to practice sword again in the yard. His illness hadn't weakened him too much. Lifting his blade, he

thought back to that night he had faced Little Yu. His dexterity and agility were quite remarkable. If he had not himself followed the teaching of a great master, he would probably not have been able to stand up against him. He immediately put his sword in the bedroom, got dressed, and went out to hire a cart. He made him take the direction of the residence of the beile.

He got out of the cart in front of the door. He had not come to see the beile. He went straight to the stable. Everyone knew that Li Mubai was a good friend of the Second Lord Tie, so he quickly went to look for young Yu. Little Yu's face was sweating and covered with mud, as if he had not washed for several days. He was wearing a well-worn blue outfit. Li Mubai said to him with a smile:

"Little brother, I came to see you yesterday. The others told me you were out."

"The last few days I've had a little business to take care of," he nodded.

Li Mubai, seeing him so scantily clad, found him really miserable.

"Brother, come with me and find a tavern to chat!"

Little Yu agreed to follow him. They took to the east. The icy wind was blowing full force. Li Mubai shivered despite his padded jacket. He glanced at Little Yu who didn't seem to mind the cold.

Soon after, they found a tavern where they sat down at a table, face to face, and ordered a few cups of alcohol.

"It's cold now," Li Mubai said. "Do you not freeze, so little covered?"

"Absolutely not."

"If you don't have warm clothes, I can give you some."

"Why not!" Replied Little Yu.

Seeing that he accepted his offer, Li Mubai rejoiced.

"Lately, I haven't seen you, I felt very lonely! Today at the temple, I

started sword training again. I thought we could see each other more often and advise each other in martial arts, what do you say?"

Little Yu raised his glass and nodded with a sigh.

"Big brother, I want to leave Beijing. I'm just missing the money for my travel expenses!"

"Do not worry," replied Li Mubai, "I can give you several tens of liang of silver, only..."

"You don't have to lend me money," interrupted Little Yu, your current situation is hardly more enviable than mine!"

"It won't be my money. Before he left, De Xiaofeng left me an account passbook, I can borrow up to two thousand liang from him. I haven't touched it so far, but we can use it. De Xiaofeng is rich, it will mean little to him!"

"I want to use your friends' money even less!" Retorted Little Yu.

For a moment he was immersed in his thoughts, then ended by saying:

"We'll talk about it more calmly another time. Fortunately, I am not impatient to go!"

Li Mubai carefully observed Little Yu, who looked annoyed and sighed. He was doing everything possible to hide his emotions behind an imposing demeanor. After drinking a few more drinks, Li Mubai said:

"Brother, we haven't known each other for long, but you looked after me when I was sick. I now consider you to be my own blood brother. We should help each other in the face of adversity and never separate. I realize, however, that you are still hiding things from me. You can't talk to me frankly, I wonder why."

"You and I are young," replied Little Yu. "We both wield the sword, and have the same level. But our experiences and our temperament are very different. I would like to share my concerns with you, but I don't think you would understand me. In a few days, you will know

everything. Don't think I'm not a true friend."

He finished the alcohol that was left in the pitchers. Without being the least bit tipsy, he stood up and said:

"Big brother, I have to go home. Tomorrow, I'll come see you at the temple, we'll talk about all this in more detail!"

He came out of the tavern and left it.

Li Mubai stood stunned for a long time, then thought: Little Yu is truly an unusual character. Could it be possible that his journey is identical to that of Shi the Fat? Could he actually be a famous Jianghu bandit hiding at the beile's residence after breaking the law? Li Mubai changed his mind. If he really was a thief, with such abilities, no one could have unmasked him. In such cold, would he be so scantily clad? Would he tell me about his money concerns? Li Mubai kept thinking about it and couldn't understand the personality of Little Yu.

The image of old guard Liu Qiyun came to his mind. He knew a lot of people in Rivers and Lakes. Why not visit him and ask him if he has heard of a young hero by the name of Yu? He could update me on Yu Xiulian and also tell me if Meng Sizhao has finally been found!

Li Mubai paid the tavern owner, got out of the tavern, and hired a cart to go beyond Qianmen to Damochang district.

He arrived shortly after at the Taixing escort agency. Liu Qiyun was delighted to see him again.

"Li, how are you? I was just thinking of going to your place, but I couldn't remember where you lived."

"I've wanted to see you for a long time," Li Mubai replied. "But I was wrongly charged in a case, and then I fell ill. I couldn't come earlier."

"I know about your indictment. I was very worried, but I was quickly reassured when I learned that De Xiaofeng had returned to the capital and that the beile Tie was considering your case. I knew

for a fact that they would find a way to get you out of this bad patch. However, I didn't know you got sick when you got out of prison."

"This disease was even more trying than my days of detention! I'm much better now, but I haven't regained my full strength yet!"

As the two men were discussing things, Li Mubai mentioned several brave Jianghu people. He questioned:

"Do you know a certain Yu-the-Second, who is nicknamed Little Yu?"

Liu Qiyun thought for a long time, then finally said:

"People calling themselves Yu are very few in the Rivers and Lakes. The only one I knew was my old brother Yu, the Iron Winged Eagle. I hardly know any heroes of the younger generation."

Li Mubai nodded. He asked him if they had found the trace of Second Lord Meng.

"In recent days," replied Liu Qiyun, "I had a visit from an old friend who came from Kouwai (15). He told me that while passing through Xuanhua, he had met Meng Yongxiang who still has no news from his second son, Meng Sizhao. Young Yu still resides there. I understood that Lady Yu had fallen very ill!"

Li Mubai grieved at this news. He took a sip of tea and was silent for a long moment.

Suddenly Liu Qiyun said to him:

"Young Li, you certainly know that two famous brave men from Henan are coming to Beijing to meet you soon?"

"Do you have to talk about Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin?" Li Mubai retorted coldly.

"Indeed! Mao-the-Sixth from the Sihai agency has been gone for several weeks now, and he will probably be back in their company soon."

"If it hadn't been for this setback, Li Mubai said with dignity, I would have already gone to Yanqing. I have no enmity with this Miao Zhenshan, however, I do know Zhang Yujin: he was the one who harassed old Yu Xiongyuan. Not long ago, I fought and injured his wife He Jian'e, the Demoness; she must still languish in the jails of Raoyang prison. I'm afraid our face to face will end in blood. But the one I curse the most is still Huang Jibei, the Lean Buddha Amida. If he's mad at me, why doesn't he confront me? He wanted to bond with me in a completely hypocritical way. He was in fact maturing a ploy to eliminate me. He is most devious!

"Huang Jibei has always been like this," replied Liu Qiyun. "I have a much higher esteem for Feng Mao. In an excess of anger, he wanted to fight against you. After his defeat, he simply gave up his sabers. He returned to Shen Prefecture and leads a peaceful life there. He even categorically refuses to see his old friends in Jianghu again."

Li Mubai felt sorry for Feng Mao, the Golden Sabers. When he had time, he would have to visit him and befriend him.

The two men chatted for a while longer, then Li Mubai took his leave. On Qianmen Avenue, he found a clothing store where he bought hooded pants and jacket, as well as a long garment, about the size of Little Yu. In other shops around, he found him shoes and a head covering. With all this stuff, braving the autumn wind, Li Mubai returned to Faming Temple.

No sooner had he arrived in front of the temple door when a man in a black hooded robe greeted him respectfully.

"Hello Lord Li!"

Li Mubai recognized one of De Xiaofeng's servants.

"What are you doing here? Did something happen?"

The servant smirked and presented him with a letter.

"A man sent by my master from Yanqing brought this note for you and informed us that Lord De would be back soon."

Li Mubai picked up the message. He gave a reward to the servant

who thanked him and left. All joyful, Li Mubai went to his room where he opened the envelope. On several pages, written in characters as big as a walnut, we could read this:

"My dear brother Mubai, don't go! Not long ago, when I left the capital, I asked you to join me in Yanqing; do nothing. Allow me not to give you more details for now, but to wait until our reunion to talk more about it.

"When I left, my little brother was still being unfairly detained in prison. We must not seek revenge for this terrible injustice. Because the Second Lord Tie, Little Mustaches, had granted you his good graces, I dared to leave without worrying too much about you. I hope that when my little brother receives this message, he will be out of the woods a long time ago. When I arrived in Yanqing, I told your misadventures to the Third Lord Yang, the Divine Lance. He was greatly impressed. He holds you in very high regard and is eager to travel to Beijing to meet the hero that you are. I must also tell you about a happy event, which concerns a distinguished guest who has joined us. This person is the only one that you cannot forget even in a dream, this heroic and dear Yu Xiulian."

Li Mubai was dumbfounded. He hastened to read the rest.

"This most unexpected meeting made me make a decision concerning you: to make this happy meeting a happy event. If lovers become a family, I, the Fifth Lord De, will have done my good deed, and not least. As soon as this letter is sent, Third Lord Yang, young Yu Xiulian and I will travel to the capital together. The mountain pass is not far away. In a few days, we'll be there. Old brother, hurry and prepare the wine for your wedding, I can't wait to drink my fill! All my best wishes for your wedding! I send you my greetings. Yang Jiantang who admires you hopes to meet you soon and Yu Xiulian greets you."

Li Mubai felt that De Xiaofeng was completely unreasonable. This affair seemed incredible to him. Just moments ago, Liu Qiyun informed him of Lady Yu's serious illness: how could Xiulian go alone? Is her mother dead? According to the letter, it was as if Yu Xiulian had already consented to marry him, but if Meng Sizhao resurfaced, what would happen? Li Mubai was going over it all in

his head. He decided whatever happened not to give his assent and not to let De Xiaofeng act as a go-between. The message only accentuated his sadness. Alone, sitting on a stool, he listened to the wind seep through the curtains. His heart was topsy-turvy.

After a long moment, his gaze fell on the two swords hanging on the wall. He thought back to Little Yu. He is an inflexible young man. He wouldn't get caught up in feelings like me. Would I never be a brave one too? Li Mubai definitely resolved not to accept this marriage with Yu Xiulian, and not to worry about their arrival anymore. He was firmly determined to leave Beijing after meeting Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin. He stopped thinking about it and left De Xiaofeng's letter on the table. At dinner time, he went out to have his meal, then went back to sleep.

He woke up in the middle of the night, heard the wind through the window and the bell ringer passing in the distance to announce the vigils. His only pillow and the cold of his blankets increased his feeling of loneliness and melancholy. Li Mubai couldn't help but think back to Xie Xianniang lying on the mat, alone and pale. She, who had just suffered so much humiliation and suffering, was now reduced to poverty. Then, he imagined Yu Xiulian on her way on her horse, with her two sabers, still in mourning, with a bruised heart. Li Mubai shook his pillow and sighed. He bundled up in the blankets and fell asleep again enveloped in endless grief.

The next day, he practiced his sword in the courtyard, then went to chat for a while with the monks in their rooms. He did everything he could not to think about what was on his mind. At lunchtime, Little Yu came to find him.

"Brother," Li Mubai told him. "Here, try this a bit, tell me if these clothes suit you."

The hooded clothes were his size. Little Yu noticed that they were new. He realized that Li Mubai had bought them especially for him. His expression changed and he didn't know what to say.

At the same time, Li Mubai picked up the letter from the table and handed it to him.



"Take a look," he said. "De Xiaofeng sent a man to deliver it to me. He says he is on his way to the capital with Yang Jiantang, the Divine Lance, and that... "

Li Mubai smiles. Suddenly looking embarrassed, he continued:

"There is something else. De Xiaofeng is most embarrassing!"

Little Yu took the letter and stuck it in front of his eyes, as if he wanted to engrave the characters one by one in his mind. His face turned even paler and he bit his lip. He examined it for a long moment, then replaced it on the table. He nodded and said coldly:

"This is a good thing!"

While patting Li Mubai on the shoulder, he exclaimed:

"Congratulations to you, big brother!"

Li Mubai looked annoyed and retorted:

"How could I accept this marriage? Young Yu Xiulian is not necessarily going to accept it too!"

"What is impracticable in this matter? replied Little Yu seriously. In the past, you fought a duel against young Xiulian to propose to her. On a trip, you saved her and her family from imminent danger. You then helped her prepare for her father's funeral. You finally escorted her, along with her mother, for the long trip of more than a thousand li to the government of Xuanhua. Your dedication to Xiulian is as deep as the sea, your attachment as strong as a mountain. This Meng Sizhao left his home and abandoned his future wife, who can say that he is still alive? And even if he reappeared, even though he was a hero, how could he say anything, having shown no kindness to her!"

Little Yu was elated and spoke in a peremptory tone. He seemed to want to force Li Mubai to admit that he was in love with Xiulian and that he had to accept this marriage.

Faced with this behavior, Li Mubai was puzzled. Lately he was suspicious of Little Yu. He had spent several days thinking about

him and learning about him, but he still couldn't figure out what kind of man he was. This affair between him and Yu Xiulian had ignited Little Yu who was now pouring out what he had on his heart. His forced smile couldn't hide the pain he was feeling. As if waking up from a deep dream or discovering a treasure, Li Mubai suddenly understood. He grabbed hold of the arm of Little Yu without his expecting it and burst out laughing:

"Brother," he exclaimed, "who do you take me for? Me, Li Mubai, do you think I am a scoundrel, one of those men who face the flesh forgets the righteousness? You don't have to hide it from me anymore. You are the one I have been looking for for so long and nowhere to find: Meng Sizhao! Yu Xiulian will arrive soon, it's destiny!"

As soon as young Yu realized that Li Mubai had unmasked him, his expression suddenly changed. Quickly, he released his arm. He whirled around and fled from the room. Li Mubai laughs:

"Little brother, where are you running like that?"

He followed him outside the temple. Little Yu had just turned north of the alley. Li Mubai ran to the entrance of the hutong (16), but he had already vanished. In the middle of the avenue, Li Mubai looked around and started to worry seriously. What had gotten into him? He said to himself: "He has character and he is a young man full of dignity. He surely won't return to the beile Tie's residence to explain who he is. He preferred to flee. He has nothing on him, no money or anything, he won't be able to get very far." Li Mubai hurried back to the temple to take a head covering. He returned to hire a vehicle and went to the Second Lord Tie.

Sitting in the car, Li Mubai couldn't be happier. He thought: Lately, I haven't found any solution for Yu Xiulian; now I find Meng Sizhao. Not only is he the most talented in martial arts, he is also a generous person. He is quite worthy of Xiulian. However, he did everything to escape and seems not to want to get married, but it is surely because he is aware of his situation and he does not have the means to marry her. No doubt, he remains skeptical about the relationship I have with her, but that is just a misunderstanding. He also can't stand the thought of making me suffer all my life. On

closer inspection, however, he did not forget Xiulian, otherwise, how would he have chosen to be called "Yu" echoing her name. "Yu-the-Second" is simply a reminder of his rank as Second Lord Meng! Li Mubai wanted to get his hands back on Little Yu as soon as possible. He would not let him escape and would wait for Xiulian to arrive to finally marry them both, putting an end to all the torments of the young woman. He urged the coachman.

Shortly after, he reached the residence. He went straight to the stable to find Little Yu. According to the servants, he was out and had not yet returned. Li Mubai recommended to them:

"I am going to visit the Second Lord Tie. If Little Yu comes back, hold him back and come and tell me immediately!"

With that, Li Mubai went to the young beile Tie.

The latter was delighted to see him so radiant. He exclaimed:

"I see that you are in good shape today, would a happy event be in the works?"

Li Mubai was extremely surprised.

"Second Lord, where did you get that from?"

"Yesterday," he replied all smiles, "I received a letter from De Xiaofeng saying that he would be home soon, accompanied by Yang Jiantang and a woman called Yu Xiulian! According to the message, she would be a remarkable female knight, with whom you would have dueled in the past, thus bonding you in love to each other. She would now come to Beijing to find you. Upon their arrival, Xiaofeng plans to be the go-between between you two to conclude this perfect predestined union."

Li Mubai couldn't help but smile.

"Second Lord, it's a long story! If I am here today, it is precisely to ask for your help in order to settle the marriage of this young Yu."

Li Mubai told him about Xiulian's origins. He explained how he had been duped by one of his companions, Xi Zhongxiao, and found

himself fighting a duel against the young woman in order to marry her. Learning that she was already promised to another, his pain had been immense. One day, walking north, he came across the Yu family surrounded by enemies, and he then drew his sword to come to their aid. Several of the assailants, including He Jian'e the Demon, had been injured, resulting in them appearing in court. Afterwards, the old escort guard Yu was wrongfully thrown into prison. He had managed to get him out after all the hardship in the world. Old Yu continued his journey but, weakened, fell from his horse. He died soon after. Li Mubai then helped his widow and daughter prepare the funeral and then escorted them from the Xuanhua government to the Meng family. Unfortunately, they learned that Xiulian's fiancé, Meng Sizhao, had been on the run for a year and no one knew his whereabouts.

The beile listened intently to all the details and twists of this story. He couldn't help but utter a cry of admiration:

"For this young woman, we can say that beauty does not buy happiness! Mubai, if I understood correctly you did not take any advantage of all these stories, but rather a series of cruel disappointments... I really pity you!"

"No," replied Li Mubai, "you do not yet understand how I feel. Despite my infatuation with Yu Xiulian, I stopped thinking about her as soon as I knew she was promised to someone else. I had heard that young Meng Sizhao was also a valiant knight. I never lost hope of finding him one day, in order to reunite them both. After my arrival in Beijing, I continued my research and it is only today that I finally found him!"

The beile Tie immediately inquired:

"So Meng Sizhao would be in Beijing? Is he good at martial arts?"

"He must be a few years younger than me," Li Mubai replied. "I had the opportunity to measure myself against him. He excels in martial arts and his sword technique is remarkable. I had to deploy all my art to see that we are on an equal footing. In kung fu, I am convinced that he is stronger than me. It is the first time since I left Nangong that I have met such a talented person. He will suit Yu

Xiulian perfectly!"

The beile was delighted.

"Since you found him, why not ask him to come here? I would also like to appreciate his talents. In a few days, De Xiaofeng will bring back the young Yu Xiulian, so we can marry them. Your wish will be fulfilled, and we will celebrate a beautiful wedding."

"I did indeed find Meng Sizhao, but I did not manage to catch him: he slipped through my fingers!"

The beile Tie was puzzled and wondered if Li Mubai was not making fun of him. He seemed unhappy. Li Mubai continued immediately:

"Second Lord, guess who this Meng Sizhao is? He's just one of your servants, Little Yu!"

The beile Tie was stunned.

"How," he exclaimed, "young Yu, good at martial arts?"

"Really very talented, adds Li Mubai. If I dare to praise Meng Sizhao's abilities, it is because I have been able to appreciate them at their true value. Men like Huang Jibei would fold against him!"

Li Mubai reminded the beile of the course of their fight. Little Yu had anticipated an attack and had warned his master. Since that day, Li Mubai paid special attention to him. Afterwards, masked, young Yu went to the temple to steal the precious sword. Li Mubai had confronted him then, but he had managed to escape. The next day, he came back to bring the sword back, and they got to know each other. While he was ill, Little Yu had watched over him day and night. They had become friends and now saw each other as brothers. However, Little Yu kept the absolute secret of his past and his origins. Li Mubai had repeatedly tried to persuade him to stop working at the stables. But he had always refused, as if he was afraid that his fame would bring him bad luck. Hearing of Yu Xiulian's arrival, Little Yu became very agitated and tried to convince Li Mubai to marry her. He added that he was thinking of

going to Jiangnan and never going back to the north. Believing his attitude to be very suspicious, Li Mubai grabbed him and asked a few questions. He had managed to free himself and run away. Li Mubai was sure he would come back. He had come to speak with the Second Lord in order to find a solution and to intercept Little Yu to allow the marriage.

The beile Tie was blushing with confusion.

"I have eyes but I can't see! Little Yu has been with me for over a year and I never noticed the talented man he was! If it comes to light, how can we not be laughed at by everyone?"

"It is not that you couldn't recognize it but rather that Meng Sizhao knew perfectly how to conceal it. Second Lord, how could you have imagined that a hero was hiding in your stables?"

"You and Meng Sizhao deserve the title of irreproachable brave. In my opinion, if he is hiding here and keeping his name, it is not only because he has made enemies in Xuanhua's government, he undoubtedly has other secrets hanging over his heart. Hearing your story with Yu Xiulian, he must have thought that you had feelings for each other. Although he is her fiancé, he seems to feel that he is unable to marry her and does not want to make you suffer all your life. So when you unmasked him, he ran away. He will probably never come back. Let's wait for young Xiulian to arrive. If she wants to marry you, what harm would it be for you to marry her? Meng Sizhao has given up on this marriage, leaving the way open to you. There will be nothing improper."

"This may turn out to be suitable with regard to the rites, but it is completely unacceptable from a point of view of honor. If I hadn't been around Meng Sizhao, we might have been able to find a compromise. He is now my friend and has helped me get back on my feet. I will never be able to return the favor to him. Should I also take hold of his future wife? Not even a bully could behave like this. I absolutely have to find him and bring him back here. Otherwise, when Yu Xiulian arrives in Beijing, I will not have the courage to stand before her."

The beile Tie was filled with awe as he listened to Li Mubai who

spoke so vehemently.

"Since this is so, there is nothing to add," he exclaimed. Now we just have to try to get our hands on him! This Meng Sizhao is truly most unique. Hiding like this at home for so long. I can't wait to see him again and learn about his martial arts skills!"

With that, Delu went to the stables to make recommendations to the servants. If Little Yu came home, he should not be allowed to leave. He also inquired about where Little Yu used to go and immediately sent someone there.

Beile Tie and Li Mubai discussed for a while, including the case of Huang Jibei, Zhang Yujin and Miao Zhenshan. Then, the beile went to rest in his apartments, and begged Li Mubai to stay. The latter waited in a small reception hall for Meng Sizhao to be found. He picked up a scroll from a shelf which he read and reread; no news about Meng Sizhao reached him. At the end of his patience, he decided to go looking for him.

The beile Tie reappeared and noticed his concern.

"Mubai," he said, "don't worry. Even though Meng Sizhao is definitely gone, whatever... young Yu will be arriving soon, so let her find a husband on her own."

Li Mubai deeply regretted telling Little Yu about his feelings towards Xiulian. It only made the situation worse. When Xiulian is there, what will he be able to say to her?

Soon after, the beile Tie ordered the kitchens to prepare food and alcohol. They continued to chat while drinking. The beile found this marriage story original to say the least, yet it did not seem very complicated to settle. Li Mubai thought about it all the time, and he listened worriedly to the beile. As night fell, Delu returned to the stables to ask for news. Little Yu had still not returned.

The beile raised his glass to Li Mubai and said:

"Little Yu cannot be found, the best is to forget about him. You have nothing to be ashamed of!"

Li Mubai nodded silently. They drank a few more cups and the table was cleared. The beile Tie, slightly dizzy with alcohol, continued the discussion for a long time with his companion.

"Mubai," he said finally, "you don't have to go home tonight, so stay overnight!"

"No, I prefer to go back to the temple, maybe Meng Sizhao is there."

"Good. See you tomorrow. Be calm! We just have to wait for him to come back, we won't let him escape again!"

The beile Tie began to yawn. Li Mubai took his leave and returned.

Night had already fallen, Li Mubai rented a cart and drove back to Faming Temple. As he walked through the doors of the monastery, he noticed the dead leaves swirling around the courtyard. There was an atmosphere of desolation. He very much hoped that Meng Sizhao was there. He glanced inside his room, it was only half-light. After turning on the lamp, he suddenly noticed that there was only one sword hanging on the wall. The precious blade the beile Tie had given him was gone. Surprised, Li Mubai noticed a letter on the table lying next to an inkwell and a brush. He hastened to unfold it. He read the few hastily written lines:

"Mubai, big brother, after you left I retraced my steps. I borrowed the precious sword from you. I immediately leave the capital. I hope you don't look for me. After so many years of wandering, I dare not see my father and my mother again. Although a marriage is arranged between young Yu and your little brother, he cannot honor her. Big brother, if any feeling binds you to Xiulian, please commit yourself to her. I'm afraid I won't be able to return to the north anytime soon. Hope to see you again one of these days. Until then, see you soon. I take leave of you with this message. Signed: Yu-the-Second."

Li Mubai was exasperated. He said to himself: "Meng Sizhao, you are playing with me! Do you really think that I am not a brave one?" Li Mubai tossed the letter aside and sat down on a stool, totally absorbed in thought.



Little Yu had therefore taken advantage of his friend's absence to return to the temple to retrieve the sword and leave him the note. That same evening, finding himself penniless, he had nevertheless not been able to leave the capital. In the depths of the night, a most unexpected event occurred at the beile Tie's residence.

## Chapter 21

*On his steed, with the precious sword,*

*He passes through the gates of the capital;*

*Dressed in black and with simple sandals,*

*She endures the journey to find her fiancé.*

The beile Tie had been married for many years and had taken a second wife. However, he preferred to sleep alone in his library. He spent his evenings reading until late at night, got up at dawn and got on his mount for fun outside the city. He did not return to the residence until lunch. That was his daily lot.

That evening, having somewhat abused alcohol in the company of Li Mubai, he walked straight to the library and lay down. He woke up in the middle of the night, unable to fall asleep again. He noticed that on the little tea table near his bed, the lamp light was almost out. An icy wind was blowing hard through the windows. The beile Tie took off his blankets and sat down on the bed. He rekindled the flame and glanced at his gold watch: it was already past three.

The beile thought back to the conversation he had had with Li Mubai about young Yu. I don't know if he got home by now, he told himself. What a singular character! If he is indeed so good at martial arts, my men and I will have to give him a warm welcome. In a few days, Yu Xiulian will be here, so we will help her prepare for her wedding, isn't that a happy event? Why does Little Yu keep hiding? If Meng Sizhao was hiding in this way, it was probably because he was in serious trouble. The marriage proposal and the long journey to Xuanhua had inexorably brought Xiulian and Li Mubai closer together, it seemed inevitable that they would fall in love with each other. No wonder Meng Sizhao feels some suspicion and leaves like this.

The beile Tie was deep in thought when he suddenly heard a slight sound of footsteps outside. Believing it to be his servant, he called

out:

"Is that you, Delu?"

No one answered him. The beile straightened up immediately and climbed down from his bed. He picked up a sword to go out and inspect the surroundings. At that moment, the entrance curtain rose and someone stepped forward. The man was not very tall. He was wearing a little black hooded shirt and blue pants. He had a pale face. His brightly shining eyes reflected a certain dignity. The beile, very surprised, looked at him more attentively. He recognized young Yu. Delighted, he exclaimed:

"Little Yu, you are here! Li Mubai and I have spent the whole day looking for you. Sit down and listen to me. You need to stop worrying. Now that I know your true identity, what do you care about the troubles that torment you, I will fix it all!"

The boy was courteous and pointed to a chair. Meng Sizhao bowed very respectfully, but refused to sit down.

"Second Lord, I must go. But first, I wanted to inform you that I have borrowed a mount from you."

With that, he whirled around to leave the place. The beile immediately stretched out his hand to hold him back.

"Don't go," he cried, "I still have a lot to tell you!"

But Meng Sizhao had already drawn the curtain. From outside, the beile heard him answer:

"What the Second Lord has to tell me, I already know. I must leave immediately!"

The beile rushed outside, but the young man had already disappeared without leaving the slightest trace. The icy wind was gusting across his face. The beile looked at the rooftops thoughtfully. He knew Meng Sizhao had slipped out that way. He didn't master a kung fu high enough to chase him down, nor could he raise the alarm. There was really nothing to do. Both angry and desperate, he went back inside. I have never met someone so

strange! In the adjoining room, he then saw Delu sleeping soundly. The beile woke him up exclaiming: "Thieves come in through all the doors and you are still asleep!"

Half-conscious, Delu stammered:

"What? What is going on?"

The angry beile gave him a slap.

"Hurry up and wake up," he shouted at him. You sleep like a dead person!"

Delu, realizing he was facing his master, quickly put on a garment. "Second lord, it is not yet daylight. Why are you up?"

"I heard some noise outside. There was a man on the rooftop, it looks like Little Yu. Go quickly to the stables and see if he's there! Check that nothing is missing! But don't make a fuss, no one needs to know!"

The Second Lord must still be dreaming, Delu thought to himself. This matter about Little Yu had been on his mind all day, how could he find himself running on the rooftops? Little reassured, fearing the cold, he had no other choice but to button up and go out. He went to wake up two servants and, without ceasing to complain, left for the stables.

Puzzled, Beile Tie rekindled the light from the lamp and poured himself some tea. A moment later, Delu reappeared breathlessly.

"Second lord," he cried in amazement, "it's very weird! Little Yu has still not returned. The large stable door was not closed and your black courier is missing!"

With a cold smile, the beile urged Delu to light some lanterns. He personally went to the stables. He immediately dispatched several servants and guards, and ordered them to distribute themselves to the nine gates of the city. If they saw Little Yu, let them bring him and the mount back. Ignoring the root of the problem and understanding nothing, the men could only do so. They set off at once to every gate of the capital, in small groups of two or three,

lanterns in hand, braving the icy wind.

The beile could not sleep all night. In the early morning, all the men he had sent returned one after the other, exhausted.

"Second Lord, we couldn't find him! We spent several hours looking for him. When the doors opened, even the officers helped us. Despite the time spent on the lookout, we haven't found the slightest trace of Little Yu or your black steed!"

The beile found it even stranger. Could it be possible that Meng Sizhao still hasn't left town? Beijing has nine gates in the inner city and seven in the outer city. If Meng Sizhao wants to leave, which way will he go? He thought to send his men back to each of them to intercept him but changed his mind: Let's forget about it, I only have to offer him this horse! He dispatched someone to look for Li Mubai.

This one arrived shortly after. As soon as he heard that Meng Sizhao had come in the middle of the night to borrow a mount to escape, he stamped his foot and exclaimed:

"Last night, while I was here, he went to the temple to pick up the sword that the Second Lord gave me. I never imagined he could come here at night to steal a horse from you. Now he has a precious sword and a swift courier. He must be away by now. Do not expect to find him!"

"I don't care what the story is," said the beile, "but the man is really surprising. Yesterday evening he came into the library. I hoped I could talk to him, but he didn't even bother to listen to me and ran away."

"When I was in the Xuanhua government, guard Meng explained to me that his second son was of a very special nature, this is true today. How can I report to Xiulian if I can't find him?"

The beile plunged into his thoughts. He finally advised him:

"Don't take this too seriously. Either way, you don't intend to marry Xiulian, no one will be the go-between for you two. When she's

here, you'll tell her everything. You didn't force Meng Sizhao to leave, she won't be able to blame you. There remains the question of the coming of Miao Zhenshan, the Fish that swallows up the Boats, and Zhang Yujin, the Golden Spear. You have to prepare for it.

Do you think you can beat them or not? You look recovered, but if your strength were to fail and they prevail, your reputation would suffer. I too would be the laughing stock of everyone!"

"May the Second Lord be reassured on this point," replied Li Mubai proudly, "Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin do not impress me at all. What a pity that Meng Sizhao is gone: if he could have been by my side, eight to ten more like them would not have scared us!"

The beile Tie nodded with a slight smile. Li Mubai was truly a daring person, and remarkably gifted in his art. He found himself hoping for the quick arrival of the two men to witness their fight. Li Mubai stayed a while longer, then returned to Faming Temple, still worried. He was both full of admiration and anger towards Meng Sizhao. He also resolved not to meet Xiulian if she did arrive in Beijing.

That evening, Lady Xie came to find him to warn him that Xianniang's illness was only getting worse. She would lie down all day crying. Li Mubai felt great sadness. Without showing his feelings, he said to her:

"You have fallen very low, but I have no means of saving you. I can only lend you twenty liang of silver, take them. I will not be able to go back to see Xianniang! Hurry back and take care of her. Right now, I'm too busy to talk to you any longer!"

Dame Xie recovered the sum and gave thanks. She pleaded for mercy again, but he didn't answer her.

After she left, Li Mubai kept huffing and puffing. This year he had only succeeded in getting into trouble on all sides. The story with Yu Xiulian had given rise to a misunderstanding between him and Meng Sizhao, with no hope of an arrangement. The one with Xianniang had taken him to court. Xianniang found herself in

agony, overwhelmed by poverty and disease. If he didn't take care of her, he would sound fickle and have a bad conscience. If he went to see her regularly, he was afraid that feelings would resurface from which he would find it difficult to let go again. He decided to help her financially, but no longer show her affection.

Several days passed, without Meng Sizhao reappearing. Li Mubai had no news from Mao Baokun, the guard of the Sihai escort agency, nor of the arrival of Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin. He spent his days deeply bored. He considered leaving Beijing and heading south to meet them. But De Xiaofeng, the Iron Hand, finally returned to the capital, accompanied by Yang Jiantang, as well as young Yu.

After her father's death, Xiulian was escorted by Li Mubai to her fiancé's family in the Xuanhua government. They had learned there that Meng Sizhao had caused great misfortune and had fled; no one knew where he was. Xiulian no longer had a father, her mother was ill, and her fiancé may not be alive. She seemed born under a bad star. Dejected, she often cried in secret. One night, without arousing suspicion, she went to see Li Mubai to instruct him to find Meng Sizhao. The next day, after leaving for the capital, she had given free rein to all her sadness.

Xiulian was aware that Li Mubai had proposed to her. Throughout the journey to Xuanhua, she had been able to appreciate his elegant appearance, his morality, his mastery of martial arts. She was under the spell, but had respected the etiquette. Regardless of Li Mubai's greatness and her unwavering support, she was promised to the youngest son of the Meng family. She could only show her gratitude and treat him like her benevolent older brother. Lady Yu's illness only got worse. She kept thinking about the tragic death of her husband and did not stop crying. After learning of Meng Sizhao's disappearance, she also wiped away her daughter's tears. In front of her future family, Xiulian had always contained her feelings. She took care of her mother.

Dame Meng was a simple person. Every day, she took her rosary and recited prayers to Buddha, hoping for the speedy return of her second son. Her sister-in-law, née Hu, the wife of older brother Meng Sichang, was not over twenty-five years old. She was devout

and extremely jealous, and did not tolerate Xiulian's coming. The first few days, she was unnatural with her, using false courtesies. Thereafter, she treated her just like a servant. She made her do everything: scrub the pots, sweep the floor, chop wood and boil the water. Besides, she never hesitated to lecture her coldly:

"Little sister, Sizhao still hasn't come home, but you still have to help us with the daily chores! We are the daughters-in-law of a modest family, we are treated like servants, so do not hope to become a young lady. I have two children who take all my time, manage!"

Xiulian had always been a pampered child, and moreover practiced remarkable kung fu. It was difficult for her to endure this situation, but her mother had it worst. She couldn't help it and endured it all in silence. She only hoped that Li Mubai quickly found Meng Sizhao and brought him back to her.

After several weeks, the family still had no news from Meng Sizhao. Meng Sichang, the eldest son of guard Meng, returned from the Kouwai. He was of tall stature, with broad shoulders, a tanned face and a thick beard. Upon his return, he noticed the presence of Lady Yu and Xiulian who were in mourning. He then quarreled violently with his wife.

"We have enough trouble already!" he reproached her. "Here we are now welcoming these two bereaved women! One day or another, bad luck will happen to our business! The younger brother is long gone. Yang the Third, the Divine Lance, says he died a long way from here! His fiancée and his mother-in-law, both widows, find themselves in our house annoying us. What does that mean?"

Sarcastic, his wife replied:

"Why are you arguing with me? It was not me who invited them! This family spends its time welcoming beggars, what can I do about it!"

From her room, Xiulian could hear all of their insults. She flinched with anger. She wanted to hold them to account, but her mother started to moan and advised her not to get carried away. Xiulian



could only contain her fury once again. She had perceived the name of a certain Yang-the-Third. The latter had, it seemed, announced the death of Meng Sizhao. It was a shock, and her tears began to flow continuously.

The days passed. Mother and daughter still resided with the Mengs. Xiulian had time to carefully observe the family. Old Guard Meng had a lot of assets and his agency was very successful. He seemed to have bestowed all his favors on his eldest son and disparaged his younger son. After getting into trouble, Meng Sizhao was forced to leave.

Meng Sichang was violent and angry, even his own parents feared him. He continually argued with his wife and slandered the Yu family in a very intolerable way. At this time, Lady Yu's illness was getting worse and Guard Meng didn't care. It was Liu Qing, the Buddha's Little Warrior, who summoned the doctor and went to get the remedies. Xiulian, she spent night and day in front of the stove preparing the decoctions, or near the bed treating her mother. More than a month passed in this way and Lady Yu eventually succumbed to her ailments. Xiulian cried all the tears in her body. She organized the funeral with the help of old guard Meng and Liu Qing. The coffin was temporarily stored at the Fushou temple in Xuanhua city.

For several days, Xiulian watched over her mother's remains at the temple. She had the opportunity to chat with Liu Qing. Now that she was alone, she no longer wanted to stay with the Meng family, being neither their daughter nor their daughter-in-law. She was thinking of quitting Xuanhua's government.

"It seems better not to stay here," said Liu Qing. But without family or friends to count on, where could the young lady go?

"Why should I necessarily find refuge with relatives or friends?" Xiulian snapped. "I might be a girl, but I have two sabers protecting me. I know for a fact that I will not suffer any affront wherever I go!"

Liu Qing knew Xiulian's talents and knew that her father had passed on his art to her. In Julu, she had saved her family from several

attackers by grabbing a sword with her bare hands.

"I know your mastery of martial arts," he nodded. "I'm sure no one will ever be able to bully you. But what's the point of leaving like this, without knowing where to go?"

Xiulian blushed at the question.

"I want to go looking for Meng Sizhao. I heard that a certain Yang-the-Third, nicknamed the Divine Lance, knew him. I want to meet him."

"Young lady," exclaimed Liu Qing, "do not believe in the nonsense of Meng Sichang. The Divine Lance is none other than Yang Jiantang, the famous escort guard of Yanqing City. He met the second master a few times, but one cannot speak of friendship between them. After the disappearance of young Meng, we checked with him, but he had not seen him again. The Chief Petty Officer now returns and suddenly claims that Yang says his brother is dead! It's too easy! If his brother fled, it was on the one hand to avoid trouble, and on the other hand, because he had quarreled with him and his father. He didn't want to live with them anymore. Young girl, if you want to find him, it is better to go to Kouwai, this is where Meng Sizhao has the greatest number of friends."

Xiulian approved his words.

After a few days, she returned to the Mengs and secretly prepared her things. Since the death of her mother, Meng Sichang was no longer angry. When he met Xiulian, he wore a completely loathsome smile. The young woman was convinced that he harbored bad intentions. She had to get out of here as soon as possible.

One day, Xiulian spoke to Old Guard Meng. She told him that she wanted to go to the village of Yushu to meditate on her father's grave.

"Don't be in a hurry," replied old Meng. "Wait a few more months, I'll prepare some money for you. You can take your father's coffin back to Julu and bury it properly. If you go alone now, I won't be at

ease!"

Xiulian knew he was only procrastinating. Old Meng always put off his businesses. How could she find the patience to wait? So she went to talk to Liu Qing about it. The next day, at dawn, she finished packing her things and left the agency. Liu Qing had prepared a good mount for her.

"Big brother Liu, see you one of these days!" she exclaimed.

"Young mistress, take great care of yourself! If anything happens to you, quickly drop me a line!"

Xiulian nodded, then, whipping her horse, left Xuanhua heading east.

She wore a short black ensemble and put on shoes covered with a strip of white cloth. She had made a bun held in place by silver hairpins. She was not made up, but was none the less charming and elegant. She had brought only a canvas bag, in which were her clothes, more than two hundred liang of pure silver, and a gold hairpin representing two phoenixes. This jewel was the wedding present that guard Meng Yongxiang gave to the Yu family. When they left their home for the north, Lady Yu took it with her and, shortly before her death, she handed it over to her daughter. Xiulian thought to use it as evidence if she met Meng Sizhao. Apart from this bag, she also had her two protective swords.

Xiulian had always won her fights and she was very proud of it. Except Li Mubai who had managed to beat her, she did not esteem any other rival. Finding Meng Sizhao was not her only goal, she also wanted to find Zhang Yujin and He Qihu in order to claim revenge for her father's death.

On her sturdy steed, the delicate Xiulian walked with a pained heart. She made no stop until Yanqing. She looked for the Quanxing agency to meet Yang Jiantang, the Divine Lance. When he saw this charming horsewoman arrive, armed with swords, Yang Jiantang was very surprised. After exchanging a few words, he learned that he was in front of the fiancée of Meng Sizhao, daughter of Yu Xiong-yuan, the Iron Winged Eagle.

"I have always been on good terms with guard Meng Yongxiang," he told her. "As for his two sons, Sichang and Sizhao, I have met them a few times. After the cadet fled, I don't know what happened. I never broke the news of his death to anyone."

Yu Xiulian was somewhat confused by these words, but was happy to hear that Sizhao was not dead. About to take her leave, a man called out to her. From the start he had been seated by their side. Small in stature and richly dressed, the man was none other than De Xiaofeng, the Iron Hand. He had avoided Huang Jibei while leaving Beijing for an official mission in Rehe (17), accompanied by his disciple Shou'er. His duty accomplished, he went to Yanqing to wait for Li Mubai and visit his old friend Yang Jiantang there. The Divine Lance had heard of Li Mubai's fame and wanted to meet the one who had shaken the capital. But it was not happening and De Xiaofeng was becoming puzzled.

"It's curious. How come Li Mubai is still not here? Could it be possible that, despite the intervention of the beile Tie, an event has occurred?"

"I don't think there were any twists and turns," Yang Jiantang replied. "Li Mubai has most likely been released from prison by now. The beile Tie must hold him back. Let's wait a few more days and if he still doesn't arrive, I'll accompany you to the capital. I would like to visit Qiu Guangchao and settle several small matters."

De Xiaofeng had been delighted. He didn't dare go back to Beijing alone because of Huang Jibei and had already been late waiting for Li Mubai to come. If Yang Jiantang accompanied him, he had no reason to be afraid anymore.

Yang Jiantang assumed that Li Mubai did not want to go to Yanqing. He began to settle his affairs and prepare his luggage. Yu Xiulian's arrival was a surprise. Yang Jiantang's reserved character did not allow him to express his pleasure in meeting her. De Xiaofeng was absolutely delighted to be in the presence of the woman who had made his friend's head spin. He observed her for a long time. You could say that her unparalleled beauty blossomed in the nobility of her appearance. He thought very quickly: She quite matches Lord Li! No one has heard from her fiancé. Her hair will

have turned white before she has got her hands on him! She and Li Mubai know and appreciate each other. I would do well to act as a go-between and make this promising union. I am sure Li Mubai would be fulfilled and stop being depressed. In addition, I would save a lot of fatigue for this young woman who wants to find a fiancé she has never met!

These reflections had led De Xiaofeng to question Xiulian. He explained to her that he held her in high esteem because her friend, Li Mubai, had spoken of her often. On behalf of the latter, Yu Xiulian began to blush.

"He is my benefactor brother. When my father died he helped us with the funeral. He was again the one who took me and my mother to the Xuanhua government. I'm thinking of going to the capital to see it!"

"If the young lady wants to go to Beijing, that's perfect! So let's walk together! Li Mubai has been there for less than six months. He has already defeated famous heroes such as Feng Mao the Golden Sabers, Feng Long, the Little Lance, or even Huang Jibei, the Skinny Buddha Amida. His fame is great and his friends numerous. If you have any problem, let him take care of it, he will solve them without problem!"

The road to the capital was long and perilous. Xiulian felt relieved to go with them. Her brother Mubai still resided there and had many supporters. There was no doubt he would help her. De Xiaofeng made seemed like a loyal person, especially since he was an Inner Court official. Her friend Yang Jiantang surely wouldn't stoop to fooling her. Her torments thus changed to great joy. She accepted their company and asked De Xiaofeng about the day of departure.

"Big brother Yang is accompanying us. It will be necessary to wait a few days, so that he can finish preparations."

Ignoring all of Xiulian's past, Yang Jiantang did not want to find himself in a situation that embarrassed him in front of the Meng family. But De Xiaofeng left him no choice after such an engagement, and he preferred to say nothing. Yu Xiulian therefore

resided at the Quanxing Agency, where she moved with Yang Jiantang's mother to the interior apartments.

A few days later, Yang Jiantang's business was closed. Several carts had been prepared. De Xiaofeng was ecstatic. He had commissioned a servant to send two letters to the capital. One to Li Mubai, another to the young beile Tie. He mentioned his return to Beijing accompanied by Yu Xiulian, as well as his plan to marry Li Mubai. On her sturdy mount, her sabers in hand, Xiulian also seemed eager to see him again.

De Xiaofeng looked triumphant, with his brocade clothes, on his saddle full of embroidery. He did not lose his eyes on young Yu. He said to himself: Li Mubai has taste. That a man meets such a charming and attractive young woman without being able to marry her and thus turns away from marriage, I can conceive it. The son of the Meng family is very unlucky. No one knows if he's still alive and his fiancée is exhausted looking for him.

Yang Jiantang was also on horseback. Sun Qi, the Iron Head, Liu Wu, the Surpasser Wukong, and other henchmen followed suit and escorted the convoy. Chen Jinbao, one of his disciples, carried his Divine Lance. Shou'er was in charge of circulating the water pipes. All walked together and no one left the convoy. The carts led the way with agency banners. They were adorned with numerous bells which, by their noise, allowed the men to forget their fatigue. After the second day of travel, they saw the Juyong pass (18). Sun Qi and Liu Wu reported on their meeting with Li Mubai a few months before, at this very place, and how he had fought the brigands in the service of Wei Fengxiang, The One Who Surpasses Lü Bu.

"Li Mubai continued on his way and stopped at Shahe Township," De Xiaofeng said. "Wei Fengxiang had pursued him until then. I personally saw Li Mubai beat him up. It is since that day that I have known him."

"I guess since his defeat, the cantankerous Wei Fengxiang abandoned the mountains of Juyong Pass," replied Sun Qi. "Who knows where he may have gone? There are still a few brigands in the mountains, but they only attack isolated travelers. They would never dare to try big blows."

Yang Jiantang listened to them talk about Li Mubai and thought to himself that he was very famous. He wanted to meet him and befriend him. If De Xiaofeng could convince him to help at the agency, he would make him his right hand. The young Xiulian, who heard them praise Li Mubai, thought back to their duel last spring, when he had come to Julu to propose to her. She began to sigh. If I wasn't already promised to Meng Sizhao, she told herself, I would go find him and offer to marry him, regardless of whether my step is excessive or not!

In front of this same landscape, accompanied by the autumn wind, each one advanced with a very different state of mind.

It took a few more days before they reached Beijing. After unloading all the carts, Yang Jiantang and his men alighted at the Tianfu Hostel on Qianmen Avenue. De Xiaofeng invited Xiulian to stay with him. The De's mother, saddened to know that young Yu was left to her own devices, welcomed her very warmly. De Xiaofeng's wife was delighted to meet such a lovely young lady and showed her a lot of affection. De Xiaofeng informed him of his intention to marry Xiulian and Li Mubai. Lady De was eager to talk to young Yu about it, but he held her back.

"This matter should not be taken lightly," he told her. "First of all, you have to make sure that Meng Sizhao cannot be found. Second, Li Mubai will have to be probed. He is a very reasonable person. We will have to find the right words and not seem to meddle in what does not concern us!"

That same day, De Xiaofeng went to Faming Temple, but Li Mubai had just left for the beile Tie's residence. So he begged Fuzi to take him there. It was around noon. Beile Tie and Li Mubai had eaten together. They were discussing Meng Sizhao's case when De Xiaofeng joined them. He paid his respects to the beile and then greeted his friend. Li Mubai explained to him that when he was released from prison, he would have liked to find him in Yanqing as planned, but that the yamen had forbidden him to leave the capital. He subsequently fell seriously ill. Finally, he had learned of the arrival of Zhang Yujin and Miao Zhenshan sponsored by Huang Jibei. He couldn't leave without facing them.

"I know about it," De Xiaofeng nodded. Don't worry, little brother, we are not afraid of them! And then I brought you some reinforcements! Everyone knows the name of Yang Jiantang, the Divine Spear: he was the one who taught the spear technique to Qiu Guangchao. He will be quite capable of defeating Zhang Yujin, the Golden Spear. As I wrote to you in the letter, another person is accompanying me: young Yu Xiulian. She currently resides with me."

De Xiaofeng explained the last word of his departure for Rehe and Yanqing, then the reasons for Xiulian's visit. He finally detailed each step of the project that he nurtured in secret.

Li Mubai was saddened by the death of Lady Yu, which had forced Xiulian to wander the highways alone.

"Big brother," he said to De Xiaofeng, "even in the presence of the Second Lord Tie, I must express my displeasure with you: you have been too impulsive in this matter. Yu Xiulian is a married woman. Considering me as her adopted brother, it is possible for me to help her, but now you want me to marry her... Wouldn't that just be a bad joke?"

De Xiaofeng was very irritated by these words. It is clear that you have feelings towards Yu Xiulian, he thought. You told me yourself this summer, when we had been drinking alcohol at my house. And now you start to play the loyal man in front of the beile, it's really deplorable from a friend!

He was about to respond, but Li Mubai continued:

"You are not aware. After you left, something happened. We were talking about it with the beile!"

Li Mubai then told him that Meng Sizhao was hiding at the beile's residence as a servant, posing as a man called Little Yu. He had stolen the precious sword from the temple and the two had thus become acquainted. When he fell ill, Meng Sizhao took care of him. After reading De Xiaofeng's letter, overcome by doubts, he had decided to run away: he had borrowed a horse from the beile and disappeared without leaving a trace.



De Xiaofeng had been attentive to this account. He was surprised at Meng Sizhao's actions. He had never heard such a story. Li Mubai was restless and moved. To avoid any suspicion, he wished not to meet the young Yu. The beile could only deplore the whimsical character of Meng Sizhao.

De Xiaofeng thought for a moment, then said smiling to the beile:

"I actually rejoiced too quickly. Now we just have to look for Meng Sizhao again."

The beile Tie nodded, then expressed a wish to see Yang Jiantang.

"He always wanted to meet the Second Lord," said De Xiaofeng. "Being an armed escort guard, with no business to deal with, he did not see how he could have come to your residence."

"Don't be shy!" exclaimed the Second Lord. "It has been a long time since I heard of his fame. I'm no longer an official, any man can talk to me."

"Well," replied De Xiaofeng, "I will prepare a reception at my home tomorrow at noon. I will invite my brother Mubai and Yang Jiantang. I hope the Second Lord will honor me with his presence and empty some cups with us, what do you think?"

"It's okay, I will not fail. Also invite Qiu Guang-chao!"

"We see each other very little at the moment. He has a good relationship with Huang Jibei. If we invite him, he might think that we get together to find a way to counter his friend... He won't necessarily come!"

"He is indeed linked to Huang Jibei by a deep friendship, but he totally disapproves of what his friend has undertaken, especially the coming of Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin. Qiu Guangchao went to him several times to hold him to account, and the two men almost broke off all contact. Qiu Guangchao knows Yang Jiantang well, if the invitation is hand-signed, he certainly won't decline it."

"Let's do it like this!" De Xiaofeng nodded.

Li Mubai was delighted with the initiative and eagerly hoped to meet the young Marquis Qiu Guangchao, the Silver Lance. The three men then talked for a while, and then De Xiaofeng and Li Mubai took their leave.

When he left the residence, De Xiaofeng expected Li Mubai to follow him home, but he refused.

"I am not accompanying you. Tomorrow I will be sure to visit your honorable mother and wife. When you see young Yu, do not encourage her to come and find me at the temple. I will quickly get my hands on Meng Sizhao!"

De Xiaofeng opened his eyes wide. But what's wrong with him? he wondered when he saw him walk away. He finally got in the cart and returned. He went straight to the interior apartments and asked his wife:

"Did young Miss Yu come out today?"

"No. I find this young girl very calm."

"I always thought that we would not find Meng Sizhao, he continued in a low voice, that is why I wanted to unite the young Yu to Li Mubai. But after what I just heard at the beile Tie, all my plans fell through!"

He then told the affair to his wife who was most surprised.

"These two are just predestined," De Xiaofeng sighed. "I'm afraid this will end badly. When Li Mubai was ill, a certain Petit Yu took care of him. Mubai had no idea of his true identity. He presumably explained his meeting with young Yu and how he had been won over by her charm and dexterity in the martial arts. Thinking that they were in love with each other, and not wanting to make his friend suffer, Meng Sizhao ran away with a beile mount. Unable to provide for his future wife's needs, he prefers to let Li Mubai take care of her."

His wife exclaimed, "is all this reasonable?"

"Yes," he replied, frowning. "To avoid any suspicion, Li Mubai

refuses to meet young Yu. And I'll have a hard time explaining that to her!"

"Good," thought his wife. "Let me tell him!"

"After having told her everything, it will also be necessary to comfort her. Tell her not to worry. In a few days, two men will arrive from Henan to fight Li Mubai. When we're done with them, everyone will disperse in search of Meng Sizhao. It is certain that we will find him. However, let's get ready for her to decide to leave, under the influence of emotion!"

"Young Yu is a careful and measured person. She is unlikely to go on a whim!" Concludes his wife.

De Xiaofeng left his residence. He left the inner city to pick up Yang Jiantang. They then both went to Faming Temple. Li Mubai informed them of the assassinations of Gros Lu San and Lord Xu, and the current situation in Xianniang. De Xiaofeng listened to him without ceasing to sigh. They then drafted the invitation letter to Qiu Guangchao. De Xiaofeng and Yang Jiantang signed it.

In the evening, De Xiaofeng returned home. While he was resting in his apartments, his wife approached him:

"After you left, I went to talk to young Yu and told her everything. She cried a lot. She wants to ask you for details."

"What?" replied De Xiaofeng. "Does she want to know what kind of man Meng Sizhao is? I do not know him. Details! She has to go and ask Li Mubai for them. Only, he does not want to see her... such a case!"

De Xiaofeng was grumbling endlessly. His wife dared not reply. A maid came to their apartment and announced that she wished to speak with Lord De. Xiulian entered the room. De straightened up immediately, as his wife invited the young woman to sit down. Yu Xiulian remained standing, looking sad and embarrassed. Frowning, she turned to De Xiaofeng:

"Big brother, what did Li Mubai tell you about Meng Sizhao?"

De Xiaofeng found it difficult to have to tell her everything. He was sweating with anguish. He tormented himself like this for a while, then finally said:

"What is certain is that Meng Sizhao has a rather difficult temperament!"

"No," Xiulian replied, "I'm sure we are predestined. I want to hear from Li Mubai!"

"He resides in a temple, it would not be correct to go there. And then, it is already very late!"

By the light of the lamp, De Xiaofeng looked at the young woman. She was wearing her black clothes and her tragic face struggled to hide her rage. He always spoke openly and generally had a good rapport with others, but at this precise moment he couldn't add anything. He sighed. Xiulian suddenly sat up and took out her handkerchief to wipe her eyes. He tried to comfort her:

"Do not worry. Tomorrow I invite the young beile Tie, Qiu Guangchao and Yang Jiantang for a banquet. We will find a solution. We will certainly catch up with Meng Sizhao!"

Yu Xiulian nodded.

"Big brother, I'm boring you with this story! The best would be if I could talk to Li Mubai tomorrow!"

"You'll see him! If he comes, he will go, first, to the inner apartments."

Xiulian seemed satisfied with this answer. She straightened up to leave them.

On leaving, she suddenly heard De Xiaofeng sigh.

"Li Mubai is really exaggerating! What's the point of this idea of not wanting to meet young Yu?"

Stunned, she stopped short. The full moon was shining through the window. Xiulian listened; silence reigned. De Xiaofeng said nothing

more.

Followed by the maid, Xiulian returned to her room. By the light of the lamp, lost in her thoughts, she continued to cry. Li Mubai may be linked to Meng Sizhao's escape. I don't understand why he doesn't want to see me again. Yet she knew him to be loyal and upright. Although this situation could really be puzzling, she refused to digress. She thought back to her poor parents and all the humiliations suffered by the Mengs. Fortunately, with her capacities in kung fu, she could endure all the tests to find Meng Sizhao. But why, learning that she was coming, had he run away? He must have a ruthless heart! Xiulian burst into tears.

## Chapter 22

*Sabers in hand, she bursts into the banquet,*

*With tears in her eyes, she inquires about the truth;*

*On horseback, he leaves the capital,*

*Pay back his brother, before the fatal outcome.*

Yu Xiulian sobbed until late in the night. She finally managed to calm down thinking about meeting Li Mubai. That same evening, De Xiaofeng ordered his cooks and servants to wake up early to prepare the banquet and reception hall.

The next day, the whole household got busy. Yang Jiantang arrived early. As soon as he walked through the door, he shouted at De Xiaofeng:

"I heard that Mao Baokun, Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin will soon come to Baoding government!"

De Xiaofeng couldn't help but shake. Although they came for Li Mubai, they were likely to know him. Who was not aware that Li Mubai was one of his closest friends! If they couldn't beat Li Mubai, wouldn't it be easier for them to correct him, De Xiaofeng? De Xiaofeng started to panic. He received famous people from all over Beijing in his home, such as the Second Lord Tie and a blood marquis. Few could afford to invite such prestigious personalities. Recovering himself, he ceased to think of the coming of these formidable adversaries.

The two men argued until Li Mubai arrived. De Xiaofeng then explained to him that Xiulian wanted to see him.

"Don't tell her that I would rather not see her... Now I can't help it," Li Mubai sighed in embarrassment. "I am unable to explain to her why Meng Sizhao chose to run away. I am now only waiting for Miao and Zhang to come. Unless I am mortally wounded, I will then go find Meng Sizhao to force him to meet Yu Xiulian."

"You really think it's better for him to explain himself," De Xiaofeng said, frowning.

Li Mubai looked even more embarrassed. After some thought, he came to the same conclusion as before: he could not announce the real reasons for Meng Sizhao's departure to Xiulian. Yang Jiantang suddenly spoke up:

"For now, you just have to procrastinate with her! We will find a solution and quickly bring young Meng back to her!"

"I don't see anything else to do," replied Li Mubai. "Without this issue with Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin, I would have left the capital a long time ago to look for him!"

De Xiaofeng remained skeptical, however. "Young Meng is a wanderer, he told himself. He rides a fast horse and the Jianghu is vast: where do you think to look for him?" As he was about to continue, Shou'er introduced himself to announce the arrival of young Marquis Qiu.

Qiu Guangchao, the General with the Silver Lance, was little more than twenty-seven or twenty-eight. Of an imposing size, he had a lot of pace. He was wearing a blue satin padded robe that day, as well as a dark black velvet jacket with a high collar and officer boots. His hat was set with a precious stone, a sign of the young man's high rank. As soon as he entered the reception hall, he asked to be introduced to Lord Li Mubai, which De Xiaofeng hastened to do. Qiu Guangchao was delighted to meet him. He responded to the consideration given to him, while examining him from head to toe. De Xiaofeng very respectfully begged the Marquis to sit in the place of honor. The latter modestly refused and sat down next to it.

Yang Jiantang, who had been his spear master, was not so polite:

"Guangchao, you are on good terms with Huang Jibei. He sent a man named Mao to look for Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin to fight Lord Li. They will be arriving soon, don't tell me you're dabbling in everything!"

Qiu Guangchao was confused.

"Several days ago, I went to Huang Jibei's home to tell him not to do this. He scowled but didn't confess. He explained to me that he had no enmity with Li Mubai and that he did not know anyone by the name of Mao. He was supposedly unaware of the coming of Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin. We almost fell out over this story!"

Li Mubai spoke:

"Big brother Qiu and Huang Jibei have been friends for a long time, they shouldn't get angry because of me!"

"That's not what I meant. If Huang Jibei did indeed spend a lot of money to bring in these men, I wouldn't mind pointing it out to him! With my friends, I have already fought against people much stronger than Miao Zhenshan or Zhang Yujin!"

Qiu Guangchao spoke vehemently, as if standing up for the unjustly accused Li Mubai. Yang Jiantang intervened:

"Perfect! Brother Qiu, this is how you should react! Both of us will take care of Zhang Yujin, we must crush him! Otherwise, the Silver Lance and the Divine Lance will only have to hide!"

"Marvellous!" exclaimed De Xiaofeng. "I long for him to arrive to witness his crushing defeat under your spears as soon as possible!"

De Xiaofeng's words had the effect of galvanizing the two men. Shortly after, the young beile Tie arrived in his turn. Everyone went to greet him and gave him the place of honor. He then addressed everyone:

"Do you know? Miao Zhenshan, Zhang Yujin, as well as He Sanhu, the Iron Pagoda, He Qihu, the Crimson-Faced Ghost, and He Jian'e, the Demoness, have all passed by the Baoding government. In two or three days, they will be in Beijing. For now, Huang Jibei is hiding in his home and many informants keep him informed of what is going on outside. He also sent his henchmen to tea houses and taverns to spread rumors of the impending defeat of Li Mubai and De Xiaofeng against heroes from Henan. It is said that this time Li Mubai may well lose his life and De Xiaofeng his entire fortune."



Li Mubai's face darkened. De Xiaofeng gave an icy chuckle.

"I don't know how I offended Huang Jibei. It is certainly because of my fortune! As for my wealth, I don't think it would give him any advantage if I lost it. My friends will always be there to help me and there's no telling who will win! I'm afraid it's him, Fourth Lord Huang, who loses face. I would like to see if he still finds the audacity to appear in front of his friends in the capital!"

Qiu Guangchao blushed slightly at De Xiaofeng's sarcasm. He thought: We have known each other for a long time with Huang Jibei. Assuming he loses face, he certainly won't stay in the capital. Only, if Zhang Yujin and the others win, my reputation as General with the Silver Spear will be ruined! The prospect worried him.

De Xiaofeng then ordered the servants to set the table and bring the dishes. He paid special attention to his guests and served them personally. The beile Tie was getting drunk and chatting freely. He exclaimed:

"On the one hand, Zhang Yujin, Miao Zhenshan, He Sanhu, He Qihu, and I don't know which Demoness. From our side, Xiaofeng, Mubai, Guangchao and Yang-the-Third, I think we can beat them by a lot. It's a shame that Meng Sizhao is not with us, he would have really been of great help to Mubai!"

Qiu Guangchao asked who it was.

"This is Petit Yu, one of the servants working in the stables of the residence," explained the beile Tie. "That man... "

The beile raised his cup to his lips and suddenly saw the guests sit up suddenly, looking surprised. All eyes were on the door.

A young woman entered. She had put on make-up and gathered her hair into a bun adorned with silver jewels. She seemed somewhat weakened, but still attractive, of rare beauty. Her height was graceful, but muscular. She wore a black ensemble, arched shoes covered with a white cloth, and her slender hands held a pair of sharp sabers glowing with cold light. There was something sad about her crystalline eyes. When she saw Li Mubai, her face turned

red.

"Big brother Li and all of you who are here," she exclaimed, "I heard your words. I know Meng Sizhao has run away and no one knows where he is. Zhang Yujin, He Sanhu, He Qihu, the Demoness are coming soon. These people are indeed my personal enemies. They forced my family to leave Julu District because they were looking for my father to kill him. It's been almost six months and my parents are both dead now!"

The young woman began to cry bitterly. Li Mubai had tears in his eyes. She suddenly brandished her sabers:

"Tell me where Zhang Yujin and the others are, let me go and avenge my parents! For Meng Sizhao, I... "

She choked on a sob. Everyone had their eyes riveted on her without saying a word. Young Yu walked over to Li Mubai.

"You are like my own big brother. Whatever happened, you absolutely have to explain to me why Meng Sizhao ran away! Is it because he knew I was arriving in the capital?"

She fell on her knees to cry even more, making the sword tips click on the ground.

No opponent whatsoever impressed Li Mubai, but seeing Xiulian begging him in this way baffled him. He was blushing with embarrassment, not knowing what answer to give her. Fortunately, the beile walked up to her and greeted her with clasped hands.

"Young girl, don't worry. Speak calmly and explain all of this to us," he said, gesturing to a small stool. "Sit down."

Yu Xiulian put the swords down on the table. She dried her eyes, trembling gracefully.

"Who are you?" she inquired.

"I am the young Beile Tie, it is in my house that Meng Sizhao lived for more than a year."

Yu Xiulian realized he was the Second Tie Lord, called Little Whiskers. She straightened up immediately to wish him ten thousand good luck, before resuming her place. Li Mubai invited all the guests to sit down and reassured her in turn:

"Don't worry!"

The beile resumed his seat in the large armchair and declared:

"I'll tell you everything in detail! Meng Sizhao fled. Who could not be surprised? It amazes me myself. It was because I was too careless that I did not see the illustrious man he was. Last year a llama that I esteem asked me to take him into my service. He didn't say anything special about him, just that he was looking for a place to eat and that he was able to do any job. I didn't really need someone, but I picked him up anyway. I installed him in the stables as a groom's helper, for two meals a day and two to three liang of money. As he put his heart into the work, I no longer paid attention to him until the day he fled. Li Mubai then told me that his name was not Little Yu, but Meng Sizhao.

"I was ashamed and saddened by this news. I happen to host several boxing masters and martial arts expert guards, all of them worthless! So I humiliated this young hero working in the stables for over a year, without suspecting a thing. I really blame myself. I immediately sought to find him to help him.

"I never imagined that he would come to my room that same evening to tell me that he was borrowing a mount from me to leave Beijing. I wanted to hold him back, but he didn't let me. I never thought he was so extraordinarily agile: he spun around and jumped on the roof before vanishing into thin air. I immediately had the stables inspected, a black courier was indeed missing. Without waiting for the next day, I sent several men to the nine gates of the city in the middle of the night to stop him. I still do not know when he was able to sneak and escape from the capital, but to this day no one has found a trace of him.

"In my opinion, Meng Sizhao is very proud. He is the type to face difficulties rather than feel sorry for himself. Why didn't he want to meet young Yu? I think he didn't have the courage, because he

found his situation too miserable, preferring reluctantly to flee. Later, if he manages to set up a business and returns to fetch the young lady, it will be proof of his worthy temperament.

"The maiden will stay with the Fifth Lord De. In a few days, we will all be looking for Meng Sizhao and bringing him back. We will not allow young Yu to confront Zhang Yujin or accompany us in our research. Although she is an expert in martial arts, if anything should happen to her, we would be even more sorry for Meng Sizhao."

The beile's speech was marked with certainty and gaiety. Yu Xiulian was grateful to him but remained saddened. De Xiao-feng and Yang Jiantang comforted her at length, promising her that they would reunite with Meng Sizhao in the coming month. Everyone tried to console her. She finally resigned herself and thanked them all politely. She retrieved her two sabers and walked out of the room with her graceful step.

Yang Jiantang praised the beile, deeming his words to be quite appropriate.

"I'm really scared of this young girl!" De Xiaofeng sighed. "Last night she questioned me relentlessly, but how could I tell her the whole truth?"

"This case is not that complicated," replied Yang Jiantang, "it is just difficult to explain. As we have seen, young Yu has a fiery temper. If she found out that her husband ran away because he suspected that she and Li Mubai had feelings for each other, she would be able to end her life."

"I doubt she'll go that far," retorted the beile. "This young woman looks quite reasonable. We just have to find Meng Sizhao and everything will work out."

De Xiaofeng explained to Qiu Guangchao who Yu Xiulian was and how she related to Li Mubai. All were discussing endlessly on the subject.

Li Mubai's face suddenly turned from red to white. Extremely

embarrassed, he couldn't keep still. Everyone was lost in guesswork trying to figure out the situation. Li Mubai did not fully understand the reasons for Meng Sizhao's departure and felt utterly helpless in the face of Xiulian's suffering. He listed all the regrets that gnawed at him: his marriage proposal after being duped by Xi Zhongxiao, his feelings towards Xiulian when she was promised to another and his confidences to Meng Sizhao. He remained closed in on himself without saying anything.

After a while, De Xiaofeng and Qiu Guangchao brought up the murders of Lord Xu and Fat Lu San. Li Mubai couldn't help but think of Xianniang. Although she was fickle in love, he often brooded over the good times they had spent together early in their relationship. After Fat Shi committed these assassinations, she was tortured and lost all support. She found herself overwhelmed by poverty and disease, perhaps she had already passed away. Unable to control his feelings, he had caused trouble for Xiulian, wronged Xianniang a lot, and failed to save either of them. How could he still have the ego to run over Jianghu and claim supremacy? He found himself very pitiful. Suddenly he banged his glass on the table.

"Second Lord, Brother Qiu, drink as you will. I would now like to take my leave and go home because I have a bad headache!"

Li Mubai bowed as he should and left the table. De Xiaofeng immediately stepped forward to catch up with him, looking displeased.

"Brother! For the first time, I invite the beile Tie and the young Marquis Qiu. You don't wait for the end of the banquet and go first. Are you doing it intentionally because you have something to reproach me with?"

Li Mubai hastened to clarify the situation:

"Big brother, don't be so suspicious! I really have a bad headache!"

"Okay, don't worry. Go and settle in the small studio and rest for a while. I am sending someone to find a doctor and I will prepare the concoction that he will prescribe for you myself!"

Under these conditions, Li Mubai could no longer escape. Qiu Guangchao and Yang Jiantang also insisted that he not leave immediately. The beile understood that the meeting with the young Yu had rekindled his wounds. Rather than forcing him to stay here and torment himself, he thought worriedly, wouldn't it be better if he went back to the temple? He glanced at De Xiaofeng and said:

"Since Li Mubai is not feeling well, have a cart prepared to bring him back!"

De Xiaofeng seemed unhappy, but the beile had spoken so. He therefore begged Fuzi to hitch up a vehicle and accompany Li Mubai back home.

After his departure, De Xiaofeng addressed all his companions:

"Mubai's business worries me. Since Meng Sizhao has fled, we could have spoken of a possible marriage between him and young Yu. Only, he categorically opposes it. If he doesn't agree, he had better not think about it anymore. However, as soon as he sees Xiulian again, he is immediately saddened. With such contradictions, our young friend does not command admiration!"

De Xiaofeng then refilled all his guests with alcohol and invited them to drink. The beile raised his glass and said, amused:

"You and I are both married and already have children. Our family histories leave us completely indifferent. Mubai, this elegant and promising young man, will end up having some too. We, his friends, can help him. On the other hand, if he is in need of love, we will not find a good doctor anywhere."

His words made De Xiaofeng smile. They all continued to dine cheerfully. The young man remained their main topic of discussion.

Li Mubai, led by Fuzi, was heading south of the city. Fuzi knew him and appreciated his good character. Sitting on the cart, he drove the vehicle while chatting with him.

"Lord Li, I heard that young Yu was a relative of you and she was very good at martial arts, is that true?"

Li Mubai was generally upset to talk about Xiulian. This question annoyed him all the more since it was asked by Fuzi.

"Don't say anything, I barely knew her father, where did you get the idea that we are relatives? As for her martial arts abilities, I don't know!"

Fuzi realized he had made him angry. He turned his head away and added anyway:

"I heard Shou'er talk about it."

Not wanting to upset him with this story, he changed the subject. He asked him casually:

"My master left the capital for several days. Did Lord Li still go to the House of Sumptuous Treasures for entertainment?"

Li Mubai had more and more headache. He motioned to him and sighed without answering. Fuzi left him alone. He cracked his whip and sang a song. The vehicle was traveling with a crash. They soon arrived in the Prime Minister's Lane and stopped in front of the Faming Temple.

Li Mubai got out of the cart and stomped into the monastery. As he walked through the front door, he saw a man in a black jacket come forward and greet him respectfully.

"Lord Li, hello!"

The man, thin and pale, was absolutely unknown to him. Puzzled, he replied:

"What's your name? What do you want from me?"

"My name is Wu," he replied with a smile. I was given the nickname of Little Scolopendre. I have often seen you at the tavern. Currently, a man is waiting for you outside the Zhangyi Gate (19). Lord Li, get your precious sword and follow me. This is an urgent matter!"

"Who is this person?"

"Lord Li, come with me and you will know, but please so do as soon as possible!"

Li Mubai thought, Wouldn't that be Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin? Unless it's Meng Sizhao? He replied in a confident tone:

"Fine, let's go!"

He went to find his sword in his room. Little Scolopendre exclaimed:

"Take some money too!"

Li Mubai was surprised:

"To do what?"

Little Scolopendre whispered a few words to him. Li Mubai immediately changed color, paralyzed. He hastily packed his bag, retrieved his sword, and set off with him towards the Zhangyi Gate. Li Mubai, worried, walked quickly. Little Scolopendre found it difficult to follow him.

Soon after, they left the city and reached a small tea house in the suburbs. In front of the door were two black horses harnessed to a post. Little Scolopendre, who had started to run, caught up with Li Mubai and exclaimed:

"Lord Li! It's here!"

As they were about to enter the tea house, a man came out, two whips in his hand. He was dressed in a long black satin padded jacket and a small headdress of the same material. He was moving his chubby body and his chubby face kept smiling broadly. Seeing Li Mubai arrive, he exclaimed:

"Lord Li, it has been several days since we last saw each other. You really look better!"

The man was none other than Shi Jiang, the Serpent that climbed the Mountain, the former boss of the Prime Minister's Alley small tavern, the runaway murderer of Lord Xu and Fat Lu San.



Immediately, Li Mubai questioned him:

"Little Yu is injured?"

"Indeed," agreed Fat Shi. "After leaving the capital, Yu-the-Second began to walk on the main roads towards the south, he was going to meet Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin to face them. We met in Zhuo prefecture. I suggested that he stop at an acquaintance's house, but he preferred to continue on his way. He told me: 'The brave is ready to die for his true friends. I lived with the beile Tie for over a year, without anyone paying attention to me. When we first met, Li Mubai immediately realized my martial arts skills. I can die for that kind of friend, he deserves it. Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin are famous in Jianghu. They come to face him. If Li Mubai lost to them, it would be really unfortunate! I'm heading south to meet them in order to block their way!'"

Li Mubai was so touched by these words that it brought tears to his eyes. Shi the Fat continued his story:

"I was staying at my friend's house in Zhuo Prefecture at the time and did nothing in particular. So I went on the roads with him, determined to meet these two men. We ran into them by chance in Gaoyang District. Yu-the-Second was too impulsive; as soon as he saw them, he rushed at them with his sword in his hand.

"To tell the truth, his martial arts skills are quite remarkable. He was perfectly capable of dealing with Miao Zhenshan, Zhang Yujin, He Sanhu, and He Qihu together, in addition to the six or seven other men accompanying them. He also injured He Qihu in the right arm. But, they were very numerous, and Miao Zhenshan used his dreaded secret weapon: one of his darts was stuck in his right arm, while He Sanhu hit him with his blade in the left arm. I saw that it was going wrong and I called the local authorities. Miao Zhenshan and the others did not dare to finish him off. My clerk and I took him to an inn. We got some ointment and applied it to his wounds. But his injuries are serious. He has a high fever. He struggled to say he wanted to talk to you!"

As soon as Li Mubai knew that Meng Sizhao was so badly injured, his tears started to fall. Shi the Fat continued:

"I got on my horse without delay, but I didn't dare enter Beijing. I had to find my brother Wu to get the message across to you. Since then, I have been waiting for you here and preparing the horses. Get in the saddle, Lord Li. Let's go quickly to Gaoyang! If we don't hurry, we might not see him again in time!"

He untied the horses. Li Mubai was furious enough to hit the ground with his scabbard.

"I have spent the last few days waiting for Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin to come, otherwise I would have left Beijing to go in search of Little Yu. If I go now, won't they say that I'm afraid of them?"

"No," Shi retorted, "these two are not planning to go to Beijing just yet. I know they left Gaoyang for the Baoding government. Now all that doesn't matter anymore. Lord Li, get in the saddle! Little Yu holds his last breath to see you again!"

Li Mubai gritted his teeth and nodded.

"Yes! Let's go to Gaoyang!"

He retrieved a whip from Shi the Fat and approached Little Scolopendre.

"Can you bother to go back to town to the Fifth Lord De, Dongsi pailou district, Santiao alley. Tell him I'm leaving Beijing to look for Meng Sizhao. I'll be back in about ten days at the latest. Above all, you must not tell him who I went with and where we are going."

Little Scolopendre accepted. Shi the Fat was surprised:

"But who is Meng Sizhao?"

"It's Little Yu," replied Li Mubai. "He is not just anyone! I'll explain it to you on the way."

He tied his sword to the saddle, pulled up his clothes, and mounted his horse. Shi the Fat shouted to Little Scolopendre:

"See you soon Brother Wu!"

The two horses, raising the dust, left the suburb of the Zhangyi gate. They took the southwest road, swept by the autumn wind.

After their departure, Little Scolopendre entered the tea house to eat two bowls of noodles. He then returned to town to take the message to De Xiaofeng. Originally, Wu Da, known as Little Scolopendre, was a thief of Rivers and Lakes. He almost lost his life because he had hurt someone in Yi Prefecture. Luckily, he had met Shi the Fat who saved him. He had become his benefactor. Now, no matter what he asked him to do, he always did his best.

Subsequently, Fat Shi came to Beijing to be forgotten and opened the tavern there. Little Scolopendre had returned to the capital where he spent his days hanging out. Sometimes having no more than a penny in his pocket, he went to eat and drink at Shi's tavern. The latter then sent him to spy for him and glean information. This is how Shi learned about the friendship between Li Mubai and De Xiaofeng, how he knew about Xie Cuixian and Lord Xu, and how he knew all the secrets of Fat Lu San.

Little Scolopendre, therefore, was delighted to have the opportunity to meet De Xiaofeng. Who knows, in difficult times, he might come begging for money. Arrived at the entrance of the residence, he declared:

"I am sent by Lord Li. I have an urgent message for the Fifth Lord De to deliver in person."

As Little Scolopendre looked like a poor wretch, the doormen asked him to wait at the entrance to give a report to their master.

De Xiaofeng had already escorted Beile Tie and Qiu Guangchao home. He was with Yang Jiantang chatting and drinking tea in his small studio. One of his servants came into the room, informing him that Li Mubai had sent someone to bring him urgent news. De Xiaofeng surprised, addressed his friend:

"Mubai is behaving really weird! He was still there just now, why is he sending me a message?"

Yang Jiantang shared his astonishment.

De Xiaofeng made him wait and went to meet Little Scolopendre. The latter greeted him respectfully and declared:

"Lord Li Mubai has just left the capital. He asked me to notify the Fifth Lord De. He will return in ten days at the latest."

De Xiaofeng, incredulous, hastened to question him:

"Where did he go? Did he go alone? What could be his hurry?"

"He was alone and I don't know where he went, probably not far. I understood that a certain Meng Sizhao had been injured. He left immediately after hearing this news."

De Xiaofeng, stunned, continued to pester him with questions. Following Li Mubai's orders, Little Scolopendre refrained from telling him that he had gone to Gaoyang, with Shi the Fat. He only replied:

"I don't know anything more. I ran into Lord Li at the Zhangyi Gate. He was riding a black steed and had his sword with him. After asking me to carry this message, he left town."

De Xiaofeng was speechless for a long time. Before letting him go, he demanded that Little Scolopendre warn him if he found out where Li Mubai was.

De Xiaofeng returned to Yang Jiantang. He was stamping with anger.

"What am I to do! Meng Sizhao is injured and no one knows his whereabouts. Li Mubai left Beijing to join him. He won't be back for ten days!"

Yang Jiantang thought that this matter came suddenly. He reassured his friend:

"Don't worry and speak less loudly!" If young Yu heard you, she would leave too. I don't think Meng Sizhao is seriously injured. He can't be far. In a few days, Li Mubai will bring him back to Beijing for treatment and everything will be settled."

De Xiaofeng continued to frown. Li Mubai is gone, he thought. If Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin arrived now, how could I get out of it? He told Yang Jiantang of his fears. The Divine Lance exclaimed:

"Do not worry! I can defeat these two on my own! Despite these words, De Xiaofeng was still not reassured. After the departure of Yang Jiantang, he hastened to go to the beile Tie and then to Qiu Guangchao. He taught them the last twists and turns. They found the news very strange. Qiu Guangchao even suspected Li Mubai of having engineered this whole thing to escape Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin.

In the evening, De Xiaofeng returned home. He felt gloomy. He did not tell Yu Xiulian about Li Mubai's departure. He advised his servants to keep their eyes open. He always kept a sword close at hand. De Xiaofeng thought it is better to rely on yourself than on others. Li Mubai is gone, I don't think the support of Yang Jiantang and Qiu Guangchao is enough. I just have to wait for Huang Jibei and his allies to find me, then I will fight and risk everything!

From then on, De Xiaofeng remained vigilant and rarely left his home. Yang Jiantang stayed at the Tianfu Hostel on Qianmen Avenue. Every day, he sent one of his guards to check on De Xiaofeng. Sometimes he moved to go and chat with his friend.

## Chapter 23

*For a noble cause blood is shed,*

*The Silver Lance is the victim of duplicity;*

*In the miserable room, sick and bedridden,*

*The withered flower, by the hand of the monster, is crushed.*

Several days passed. Qiu Guangchao, the General with the Silver Lance, having nothing to do, decided to visit Huang Jibei. He wanted to warn him of Li Mubai's decision and persuade him not to go after De Xiaofeng again. Qiu Guangchao's wife, Lady Gao, had always had a very good relationship with Huang Jibei's wife, Lady Shu. She had fallen ill and Lady Gao had prepared various gifts to help her heal. Qiu Guangchao had two vehicles harnessed, while his wife informed her mother-in-law of their departure. Accompanied by a servant, they went to the Huangs.

Qiu Guangchao lived in the western part of the city. Huang Jibei resided east of the capital, at the Beixin Bridge. They walked for a while before arriving at the house. As he got out of the car, Qiu Guangchao noticed five to six sturdy horses tied up in front of the entrance. They were guarded by several fierce-looking men, clad in coarsely woven tunics, cutlasses on their belts. Qiu Guangchao was surprised. Servants came forward and greeted him respectfully.

"Lord Qiu, welcome! Is your wife coming too?"

He did not answer and asked, pointing to the horses:

"Who do they belong to?"

"To the friends of Fourth Lord Huang," explained one of the servants. "They have just arrived from Henan."

It is without a doubt Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin! He thought to send his wife home, but several servants were already coming forward to help Lady Gao get out of the car.

Qiu Guangchao's wife was young and beautiful. The entire Huang household, without exception, had always admired and envied her. Surrounded by maids, Lady Gao was led into the interior apartments. She was welcomed there by Huang Jibei's wife, as well as by two young concubines. After they had wished each other ten thousand happinesses, Lady Gao declared:

"Wife of the Fourth Lord, I heard you were sick, I came at hearing the news!"

"Indeed," answered Lady Shu, "I had a headache and a little fever, but I am already much better."

Lady Shu invited them to enter. Qiu Guangchao also exchanged a few courtesies, then they walked along a corridor to an interior courtyard.

From the reception hall came bursts of laughter. There was a confused, noisy and coarse commotion. This caught the attention of Qiu Guangchao who tilted his head to take a look. Two servants then came out and said to him:

"The Fourth Lord invites you to settle in the interior apartments!"

Qiu Guangchao tilted his head slightly, unhappy. Accompanied by his wife, he followed the women of the Huang house into the apartments.

Qiu Guangchao was a regular here and never had to be shy. During his visits, he indulged in joking and even allowed himself a certain familiarity with his friend's wives. He didn't appreciate being alone in the great hall bored. A maid brought him some tea. Lady Gao accompanied Lady Shu to her room for a chat. Qiu Guangchao drank his tea and waited a long time before Huang Jibei finally appeared. This one looked radiant and excited. He said to Qiu Guangchao, breathless:

"Brother, take a seat, I'll come back to discuss with you. Miao Zhenshan, Zhang Yujin, He Sanhu, and other friends have arrived and are in the reception hall. I must take care of them, wait for me here a little longer!"

Huang Jibei returned to his guests.

Outraged by such behavior, Qiu Guangchao was so exasperated that he could not retort anything. We've known each other for many years, he told himself. If any friend comes to visit him, he must introduce him to me. Huang Jibei claimed to not know Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin. To my surprise, he now takes care of them and treats me with indifference. Furious, he got up and called a maid to go get his wife.

Lady Gao was chatting happily. She didn't understand why her husband suddenly wanted to leave. Lady Shu insisted on keeping her friend over for dinner, but Qiu Guangchao urged his wife to come home. The mistress of the house and her maids noticed his nervousness. They dared not ask him anything and contented themselves with escorting them to the door of the apartments. Huang Jibei was still with Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin at banqueting in the reception hall. No one knew what they were discussing. He did not appear to accompany Qiu Guangchao home.

Enraged, he walked through the door of the residence, followed by his wife and the maid. The men with the daggers, still in front of the entrance, gazed at Lady Gao with their equivocal gaze. They wore vile smiles. One of them, of small stature, pulled one of his companions towards him and said:

"Hey, take a look! Your wife has just come out!"

Qiu Guangchao, who clearly heard it, got into a great anger. He walked up to the man and suddenly gave him a slap in the face.

"Bastard!" he growled. "What did you just say?"

With a thud, the man fell on his buttocks. The two other accomplices rushed to grab Qiu Guangchao. The individual stood up quickly, pulling out his dagger to strike him a blow.

"You dare to hit your master! I am from Henan and I accompanied Lord Miao to Beijing. How could I let myself be bullied like this?"

Qiu Guangchao didn't let the blade come near! With another stroke,



he made the man do a new somersault. The other two also took out their cutlasses and advanced on him. The General with the Silver Lance stole one of the knives and turned it against one, injuring him in the process. Suddenly great agitation reigned in front of the entrance. Qiu Guangchao ordered his wife and the maid to get into the cart as he grabbed another boor, punching and kicking him with a volley. The family's servants could not reason with him.

The incident had reached the reception hall. Huang Jibei, Miao Zhenshan, Zhang Yujin, Mao Baokun, He Sanhu all came running together. As soon as the Skinny Buddha Amida noticed that Qiu Guangchao was abusing one of Miao Zhenshan's men, he lost his temper.

"Brother, you can't do this! These men arrived with Lord Miao, they are all our friends!"

"What are you talking about? Our friends?" growled Qiu Guangchao. "I don't know any Miao lords. If I beat them up, it's because they dared to insult my wife!"

While yelling, he continued to strike.

Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin, furious, stepped forward to grab him. Huang Jibei and Mao Baokun hastened to stop them. The latter said to them:

"Venerable Uncle Miao, Big Brother Zhang, do not get carried away! This man is the young Marquis Qiu, the General with the Silver Lance, he is a very good friend of the Fourth Lord Huang. It must be a misunderstanding. Let's take the time to speak calmly!"

Mao Baokun knew Qin Zhenyuan, the young marquis' boxing master, very well. He knew that Qiu Guangchao was very good at martial arts, but above all he was rich and powerful. It was better if Miao and Zhang didn't provoke him. He preferred to intervene. Zhang Yujin was not unaware of the fame of the General with the Silver Lance. The elegant young man was unmatched at the technique of the spear, it was said, and he had long hoped to compete with him. He could see that Qiu Guangchao was unusual in appearance. Wanting to avoid any haste on the part of his uncle

Miao or his men, he intervened, a fist clenched in his other hand:

"Is your Excellency the young Marquis Qiu, the General with the Silver Lance? Why put yourself in such a state? We don't know each other, but you are a longtime friend of Fourth Lord Huang. If something happened that offended you, let's go inside and explain it all to us!"

Qiu Guangchao observed Zhang Yujin. He was hardly more than twenty years old, with a round face and large eyes topped with thick eyebrows. There was something fierce about his expression. He was wearing a quilted blue silk robe and a black satin high-necked jacket.

"What is your honorable name?" Qiu Guangchao asked him.

Huang Jibei replied:

"This is Zhang Yujin, the Golden Spear of Henan. You, the Silver Lance, should get along with him!"

Qiu Guangchao eyed Zhang Yujin. He said sarcastically:

"Nice to meet you, I've wanted to meet you for a long time! Wait until I take my wife home, I will come back immediately to talk to you!"

He was getting into the cart and getting ready to leave when Miao Zhenshan, He Qihu and the two individuals who had just been beaten up cried out together:

"Don't let him get away!"

Everyone rushed to hold him back, but Zhang Yujin stopped them by spreading his arms. Huang Jibei exclaimed:

"Brother, don't go immediately. I still have things to tell you!"

Qiu Guangchao ignored him and addressed Zhang Yujin:

"Prepare your Golden Lance! In a moment, I'll teach you a lesson!"

He rushed the drivers and the two vehicles left the scene. Zhang Yujin watched them speed away while smiling coldly. He ordered his men to return to the inn to get his spear, then addressed Miao Zhenshan:

"Uncle, do not intervene later. Let me face the General with the Silver Lance alone!"

Originally, Huang Jibei had invited them to counter De Xiaofeng and Li Mubai, he never imagined that the first to fight them would be Qiu Guangchao. He had been friends with the young marquis for many years and this friendship had notably enabled him to increase his fame. How could he witness his loss to Zhang Yujin? Back in the reception hall, he begged him not to anger Qiu Guangchao. He did not manage to make him listen to reason. Miao and Zhang were waiting for Qiu Guangchao to return for the duel.

Returning to his residence, the latter kept pestering. He was angry first with Huang Jibei who did not have to talk to these individuals from another province. They also allowed themselves to humiliate him without his friend intervening, if only by a sensible word. Second, he was furious with Zhang Yujin, who was so arrogant, he who had never set foot in Beijing. If he didn't crush him, his reputation as a Silver Lance would be ruined. Qiu Guangchao was dying to retrieve his weapon to rush to Huang Jibei. He wanted to pit himself against Zhang Yujin without delay and determine who was the best. But he changed his mind. There were far too many of them, especially since Miao Zhenshan, He Sanhu and their men weren't the type to let it go.

Qiu Guangchao was on hot coals. He summoned Qin Zhenyuan and told him about the humiliation suffered by Miao and Zhang's henchmen. Their attitude, most arrogant, could not be tolerated. He was determined to face them. His master immediately wanted to dissuade him.

"Mao Baokun went to Henan to look for Miao Zhenshan, the Fish that swallowed the Boats, and Zhang Yujin, the Golden Spear. If Huang Jibei invited them to the capital, it was to fight Li Mubai and thus seek revenge. All this does not concern you at all. You are a very good friend of Skinny Buddha Amida, if you don't want to

support him, that's no reason to oppose his hosts!"

"Do you really think that I can become the friend of these bandits?" Qiu Guangchao coldly retorted. Li Mubai left the capital. De Xiaofeng is not one to give in, Yang Jiantang and I cannot allow Zhang Yujin to dictate his law in Beijing!"

Steward Hao San, the Ox's Head, whom Huang Jibei had sent to his friend's house, then introduced himself. He explained to Qiu Guangchao:

"The Fourth Lord is sending me to dissuade you from quarreling with Zhang Yujin. These men are the Fourth Lord's guests and you are one of his relatives, don't make him lose face!"

"If I had known that they were invited by your master, I would never have set foot at his place!" he replied. "Go home and reassure Huang Jibei: whether I win or lose, I take full responsibility! Also tell Zhang Yujin to wait for me, I will arrive without delay!"

Hao San seemed very embarrassed at this answer. He still spoke at length with Qin Zhenyuan.

Soon after, De Xiaofeng and Yang Jiantang arrived. Qiu Guangchao was very excited.

"Did you know that Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin have arrived?"

"I found out this morning. I was told that they had come together!" De Xiaofeng replied, dejectedly.

Qiu Guangchao then told them about his visit to Huang Jibei and his hang-up.

"They are waiting for me. Come with me, you will witness my fight!"

"Well," Yang Jiantang said enthusiastically, "I will send someone to get my spear and we'll leave without delay!"

"Let's not be so impatient," replied De Xiaofeng. "Huang Jibei is most vile, but we cannot afford to fight right outside his door! It would

be best to agree to a duel and invite several friends to attend."

"Who do you take Miao and Zhang for?" Yang Jiantang said impatiently. "Is it worth inviting our friends to come and fight against them? Today, this Zhang humiliated Guangchao. Let's go find him and, with our spears, expel him from the capital!"

He begged Qiu Guangchao to hurry. The marquis changed quickly. He asked Qin Zhenyuan and a few servants to accompany them. They took two spears and several sabers. They got into the cart and all took the direction of the Beixin bridge.

Hao San, the Ox Head, had already returned to the Huang family residence. Distraught, he discreetly informed his master:

"Qiu Guangchao was furious. No one has succeeded in reasoning with him. He brought in De Xiaofeng and Yang Jiantang, they'll all be there at any moment."

Huang Jibei frowned and thought the matter was going wrong. In the reception hall, Miao Zhenshan and his gang were chatting and drinking happily while waiting for Qiu Guangchao to come for this clash. Huang Jibei, extremely concerned, however remained attentive and obliging with his guests. Miao Zhenshan had taken off his long jacket. He was now only wearing short pants and a brocade sling bag where he kept his darts. He had large leopard eyes and a tousled gray beard that looked like a hedgehog. Beside him, a comrade in the prime of life held his sharp saber at his disposal. Miao refilled himself with generous glasses of alcohol and kept pouring out vulgarities, not being able to conceal the attitudes of a highwayman.

Soon after, a servant arrived to announce the arrival of the young Marquis Qiu and the Fifth Lord De. De Xiaofeng's presence plunged Huang Jibei into a great fury. Zhang Yujin's henchmen also came to warn him. The latter straightened up and declared:

"Qiu Guangchao has returned! Leave it to me!"

Everyone left the room and went outside.

It was the second time that the Marquis had come during the day. This time, he just waited outside the entrance with Yang Jiantang. Zhang Yujin then appeared and Qiu Guangchao introduced him to his friend:

"This is the Divine Lance, escort guard from Quanxing Agency, Yanqing. He comes especially to meet you!"

Unperturbed, Zhang Yujin smiled. He gave him a "delighted" half-heartedly. He glanced at De Xiaofeng still sitting on the cart. But how could he have been impressed by these three men? He begged his uncle and his other companions to step aside and prevented Huang Jibei from dissuading them from fighting. He retrieved his spear from one of his men and waved it at Qiu Guangchao and Yang Jiantang. His round face wore a fierce air. He stared at them with his eyes like a demon.

"You want to pit yourself against me, so come closer! The entrance is spacious, we can largely brandish our three spears!"

"Two against you, retorted in an icy tone Qiu Guangchao, we would no longer be heroes!"

He retrieved his spear from his servant's hands, waved it at Zhang Yujin too, and rushed forward. Zhang Yujin brushed aside the attack. He knocked in the direction of the throat of the young marquis, who parried and retaliated. Golden Lance and Silver Lance intertwined. The irons crossed each other in all directions, the red pompoms which adorned them fluttered on all sides. The poles clashed noisily. After more than thirty fierce assaults, there was still neither winner nor loser. Miao Zhenshan, He Sanhu and the others were about to intervene, but Huang Jibei exclaimed:

"Guangchao, let's go! Let it go! Whatever happens now, I have lost face!"

But how could Qiu Guangchao have paid attention to these words? His spear, like a silvery snake, struck on the left and stung on the right, appeared above and blocked below. It is certain that no opponent other than Zhang Yujin was capable of fighting against him.

Yang Jiantang saw that Qiu Guangchao had made great progress. But Zhang Yujin, quick and agile, was most expert, no wonder he was renowned throughout Henan. Yang Jiantang, weapon in hand, watched the fight closely. He was itching to make a few exchanges as well. De Xiaofeng, still sitting, looked worried. Zhang Yujin's accomplices were numerous; with their bellicose air, all seemed ready to leap to help him. De Xiaofeng knew he couldn't overcome them on his own. The traffic in front of the entrance to the house had stopped. The two adversaries clashed with neither being able to triumph. The fight was on and on and it was still not clear who had the upper hand. Miao Zhenshan, at the end of his patience, exclaimed:

"What is this duel?"

He raised his hand and threw a dart at Qiu Guangchao. It planted itself in his right shoulder. The intense pain no longer allowed him to hold his spear properly and he took a few steps back. Zhang Yujin immediately took advantage of this low blow. He aimed at the throat. Immediately, Yang Jiantang came running and managed to block the attack.

"Do you want to expose yourself to death too?" Zhang Yujin growled.

The two men then engaged in a bitter struggle. Miao Zhenshan and He Sanhu, brandishing their sabers, rushed to crush Yang Jiantang.

Qiu Guangchao, who had given up the fight because of his injury, was supported by his servants to get into the cart. Huang Jibei was going to order his men to attack De Xiaofeng. The latter got angry and exclaimed, pointing at him with his saber:

"Huang, beware! We are in front of your house. If bad luck happens, you will have no escape!"

Huang Jibei was worried that the case would get too big. Mao Baokun was also very worried about the turn of events. They took out their sabers and intervened to stop them. Huang Jibei then addressed Yang Jiantang:

"Third Lord, lower your weapon and let me say a few words to you!"

Yang Jiantang was so furious that he couldn't speak a word. He held his spear up, eager to continue the fight.

Huang Jibei pressed a fist in his other hand to Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin.

"If you came to Beijing, it was to confront Li Mubai. All of these people are close friends. If something didn't suit you, let's explain it calmly. There is no point in falling out like this. Qiu Guangchao is my longtime brother, I have also known Yang Jiantang for many years. Suppress your anger, don't make me lose face entirely!"

These words made Miao Zhenshan even more irascible. He felt his darts and brandished his sword. He was scolding in his local dialect, showing that he feared absolutely no one when he came to Beijing. For him, Qiu Guangchao and Yang Jiantang, both being friends of Li Mubai, deserved only death. Zhang Yujin, in a spark of lucidity, spoke coldly to the Divine Lance:

"If you don't admit defeat, then fix another duel. We can fight again without disrupting the entrance to Lord Huang's home!"

With that, Huang Jibei and Mao Baokun promptly dragged Miao Zhenshan and his gang inside.

The Lean Buddha Amida quickly retraced his steps and saw in the distance the two carriages of the Marquis moving away towards the west. Accompanied by Hao San, he hurried to catch up with them in order to inquire about the seriousness of his injury. He stopped the cart and clung to it. Qiu Guangchao, half lying in the seat, was pale in pain. He said coldly:

"Jibei, I never imagined that you could invite these bandits in and let them use their secret weapon against me. Since this is so, our friendship is breaking up today!"

"Brother, why didn't you listen to me?" Huang Jibei was angry. Originally, we are on the same side. If a few words offended you,



why..."

Huang Jibei had not finished his sentence when De Xiaofeng struck him on the shoulder. Huang Jibei, turning his head, gave a mischievous look.

"What?" he exclaimed. "Would the Fifth Lord De oppose me?"

"How dare I provoke you?" replied De Xiaofeng coldly. "In the name of our old friendship, I must warn you that this Miao Zhenshan is a notorious Jianghu thief. He is in Beijing because he responded to your invitation. If he and his clique commit a crime in the capital or cause misfortune, it's the end of you!"

"For sure!" Huang Jibei exclaimed, "slapping his chest. How could I pretend they're not friends? Whatever you say to the yamen or to the Imperial Censor's offices, I'm not afraid."

"Good," replied De Xiaofeng, "you are responsible for your words!"

Yang Jiantang kept staring at Huang Jibei.

The two cars, followed by the servants, returned to Qiu Guangchao's residence. Huang Jibei gritted his teeth and gave in to panic. He finally went home. In the reception hall, in an impressive uproar, his guests were drinking and bragging. Huang Jibei raised a toast to all his guests, flattering them. He then advised Miao and Zhang not to oppose the Marquis and his friends any longer. He finally insisted on a way to find Li Mubai. From now on, only the punishment that will be inflicted on him would be a source of appeasement for him.

Zhang Yujin was drinking and laughing out loud.

"Lord Huang, rest assured! We are not afraid of the young Marquis Qiu. Today, even if my uncle hadn't hurt him with his dart, I would have stabbed him with the tip of my spear, just like this Yang Jiantang. Li Mubai heard of our coming, and he is hiding somewhere now. We will eventually catch him!"

Suddenly, Miao Zhenshan banged his fist on the table.

"I want to find him and end his dirty doggy life!"

Li Mubai's name only stoked the hatred of He Sanhu and others. Miao Zhenshan continued to holler.

"I'm sure he was the one who kidnapped my wife Xie!"

Huang Jibei was starting to scowl. At the mention of his runaway wife, Miao Zhenshan tilted glass on glass and cursed even more. He was becoming indecent. Lest he end up completely drunk and fuss, Mao Baokun intervened:

"Uncle Miao, Big Brother Zhang, you should go home. Rest a few days, we will always be in time to take care of Li Mubai and this young Xie."

"Well, let's go home!" Zhang Yujin continued.

Miao Zhenshan reeked of alcohol. He had drunk until the blood rushed to his face. He exclaimed:

"If we have to go, let's go! Lord Huang, you are a precious friend. I, the Fish that swallows the Boats, did not come to the capital for nothing! Okay, I'm going back to the hostel. Don't forget to send me several young beauties to have a little fun!"

Huang Jibei forced himself to smile.

"Of course, of course!" He replied.

Zhang Yujin clenched his fist in his other hand.

"We disturbed you! Agree to join us tomorrow at the hostel!"

"Certainly, I'll come!"

"If Qiu Guangchao asks for more," continued Zhang Yujin, "send him to us!"

Huang Jibei nodded. He Sanhu and other men supported Miao Zhenshan. The brigand finally made up his mind to leave.

Lean Buddha Amida personally escorted them to the entrance and watched them go. He returned to his yard without ceasing to

lament. He asked a servant to go to the Marquis Qiu and considered the situation. He had spent a lot of money to bring this bandit Miao Zhenshan. He hadn't caught Li Mubai or corrected De Xiaofeng at all, but had hurt his friend. He was, moreover, extremely rude. If Miao or his men caused misfortune in the capital, he would suffer. He felt upset. It was all just one more cause for concern. He did not know the misdeeds committed by these individuals in other provinces, but if the competent authorities found them, he would inevitably be involved. It had not been easy to bring in these men. He had waited a long time for them and hoped to take advantage of their martial arts ability to wreak his revenge. That is why he prepared to pay them a courtesy visit that same evening, in order to devise a way to correct De Xiaofeng, before finding Li Mubai.

Mao Baokun had taken charge of accommodating them all at the Qingyun hostel, in the Ciqikou district, at the Chongwen gate.

Miao Zhenshan was originally a well-known thief from Henan. Notorious bandit, he never personally accomplished thefts. He had under his orders many disciples and henchmen, scattered all over the place. They took care of stealing or kidnapping young women, always reserving the best loot for him. Miao Zhenshan became the richest man in Zhumadian, without having any major crimes under his belt. If he had come to Beijing, it was to find his runaway wife, Xie Cuixian, and also to duel Li Mubai. He hated him, not because he had opposed Huang Jibei and the He siblings, but because Mao Baokun had revealed his relationship with Xie Cuixian to him. While she was a courtesan, he had wanted to marry her and return to live with her in her native region. Mao Baokun even added that Li Mubai had threatened him and hoped to kill him to avenge the death of Cuixian's father. Miao Zhenshan believed in all of these stories. He appealed to his nephew Zhang Yujin and they left without delay in the direction of the north.

Zhang Yujin was the son of Huo-the-Fifth, known as the Vixen, whom Miao Zhenshan considered his sister. He had learned to wield his Golden Spear from his childhood. He reigned as a despot in the entire northern region of Henan and had never met an adversary of his size. The kinship which united him to Miao made the contenders for combat all the more rare. After he turned ten, he took He Jian'e

for his wife. Snarling and fearless, the Demoness was not very beautiful. The couple did not seem to be in harmony. After He Feilong's death, He Jian'e traveled to several regions to befriend some Jianghu bandits with the intention of avenging her father. Zhang Yujin did not interfere with what she was doing. He had founded an escort agency in Kaifeng and had many adventures with other women. Years went by.

One day, He Qihu came to him to explain that his brother and sister, as well as disciple Zeng Debao, had gone to Yu Xiongyuan, the Iron Winged Eagle, to avenge their father and master. They had faced him twice without success. He Jian'e and Zeng Debao were both seriously injured and held captive in Raoyang District. He Qihu clarified that the young girl of the old guard Yu was one of the most expert in martial arts, and that a certain Li Mubai had lent them a hand. Equipped with a precious sword, he seemed to be the most formidable of them. He Qihu urged him to go and rescue them and hunt down the Yu family.

Zhang Yujin was furious, but hardly worried about the Demoness. My first wife has just been humiliated, he told himself. If I don't come to her aid to avenge her, they'll laugh at me and call me a wimp! He was nevertheless surprised to learn that his wife, very gifted in her art, had not come to the end of this young Yu, whom He Qihu had presented as an extremely beautiful girl of barely eighteen years old. Stung by curiosity, Zhang Yujin therefore prepared to follow her north. But his mistresses did not hear it that way and cursed him. They delayed his departure for several days, which almost caused discord between him and He Qihu.

At the same time, Mao Baokun, who had gone to Zhumadian to invite Miao Zhenshan, disembarked with his uncle.

"Big brother Zhang," Mao Baokun had declared, "if you go, why don't you take the opportunity to accompany us to Beijing to have a good time? Li Mubai is a big name in the capital: whoever defeats him will enjoy immediate fame. And then there is also Qiu Guangchao, the General with the Silver Lance. He learned the spear technique with Yang Jiantang and now the student has passed the master. If you went to the capital with us, you might face each other. By winning, you would be respected like a king by those who

wield the spear!"

The proposal was enticing. Zhang Yujin had heard of Qiu Guangchao for a long time and if it was possible for him to meet him, he had to jump at the chance. Especially since Miao Zhenshan and He Qihu urged him to leave. Zhang Yujin prepared his things, mobilized about ten men and finally accompanied his uncle, He Qihu and Mao Baokun on their journey north.

Mao Baokun knew Jianghu well. During the journey, he told several stories that were circulating there. However, some were of his invention. In short, he was very eager to describe Huang Jibei as righteous and heedless of riches, and Li Mubai as an arrogant and greedy man. He was only fueling the hatred of Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin, who hoped to get their hands on him as soon as possible. To humiliate him would not be enough for them, they would only be satisfied when they took his life. The brave rivers and lakes heard of their passage. Many came to their inn to greet them and even invite them to feast at their homes. Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin felt more powerful and authoritative than ever.

They soon arrived at the capital of Raoyang district. The Demoness and Zeng Debao had now been imprisoned for over three months. The charges against them were robbery with violence. He Erhu had already bribed magistrate Tang and prison officials in order to change the charges. He claimed that no one had ever filed a complaint against the Demoness and Zeng Debao. When Zhang Yujin arrived with more money, the court released the two prisoners. Miao Zhenshan suggested that Zeng Debao return to Henan. Zhang Yujin advised the Demoness, whose wound was not completely healed, to follow them to Beijing for treatment.

Subsequently, the Baoding government escort guard, Tao Hong, aka the Black Tiger, along with other men full of admiration for them, sent henchmen to meet them to invite them and get acquainted. Miao Zhenshan, Zhang Yujin, and the others accepted the invitation with great enthusiasm and diverted their way towards Baoding. They did not expect to meet Meng Sizhao in the district of Gaoyang, this lone rider from the capital.

Driven by boundless pain and indignation, Meng Sizhao had gone to

meet them. As a token of his gratitude to Li Mubai, he had not hesitated to provoke them, risking his life. He thus hoped for his friend's marriage to Yu Xiulian. Along the way, he had met Shi the Fat, who guessed his intentions. Shi stayed with him in anticipation of the clash.

In the vicinity of Gaoyang, they had finally come across them. Meng Sizhao immediately engaged in combat. Miao and his gang made no concessions and retaliated without delay. Shi the Fat had supported him during a few exchanges. He had seen that he was really very strong, but how could he have overcome so many adversaries? Zhang Yujin was also formidable with his spear, He Sanhu and He Qihu defended themselves quite well with their swords. Mao Baokun kept shouting to give them courage. Shi the Fat had taken advantage of a moment of inattention to seek out the local authorities. When they arrived, Meng Sizhao was already seriously injured, lying on the ground in a pool of blood. He Qihu was also hit by Meng Sizhao, but Miao Zhenshan claimed victory.

They stopped for several days in the government of Baoding. They met many brave men there, before returning directly to Beijing. They finally arrived at the capital and introduced themselves to Huang Jibei. No one could have foreseen the clash with Qiu Guangchao or the confrontation from which he emerged injured. After the capitulation of this important personality, all were bathed in euphoria. Miao Zhenshan's henchmen spent their days bullying the people and provoking disputes. The local scoundrels were obliged to let the new proteges of Huang Jibei gain ground. Zhang Yujin still advised them to follow certain rules, but Miao Zhenshan himself turned away from the question altogether. Every day he went with his men to brothels, sowing confusion with his violence. After ten days, everyone in the southern city had heard of him, the Fish that swallowed the Boats.

Qiu Guangchao was treating his injury. Yang Jiantang suffered in silence, not being able to fight against them. He could not bear that Miao Zhenshan would constantly use his secret weapons and thus injure his opponents. He rarely moved from his inn and advised his men to remain discreet. De Xiaofeng also rarely went out of his home, apart from his daily trips to the Inner Court. He had not

disclosed to Yu Xiulian the departure of Li Mubai or the arrival of Zhang Yujin. In the streets of Beijing, only Huang Jibei showed himself without any qualms, traveling to the south of the city every day to chat with the Miao Zhenshan gang and the Feng brothers. Their only concern was finding Li Mubai and countering De Xiaofeng and Yang Jiantang.

Mao Baokun was aware of the marriage to Assistant Minister Xu. He also knew that less than a month later, he had been murdered with Fat Lu San, at their residence in the Alley of the Maneuver Field. Mother and daughter were taken to the yamen and abused for several days before being released. However, he did not know where they had ended up. Mao Baokun informed Miao Zhenshan, who got into a great anger, calling him good for nothing.

"Kid! Why didn't you lock her up before you came to get me? Here she is back in the wild, are you playing with me? I couldn't care less about that named Xu or that Li. In ten days, if you haven't found her, I'll kill you!"

The warning made Mao Baokun sweat with anguish who kept nodding, completely panicked. He did not imagine, by inviting Miao Zhenshan to swindle some taels from Huang Jibei, that he would find himself in such a situation. Li Mubai had fled. After Lord Xu's murder, Xianniang could not be found. Miao Zhenshan was giving him ten days to get his hands on her. That seemed sufficient, but if he didn't know more by the appointed date, Miao Zhenshan would certainly get carried away and cut him into pieces. Mao Baokun was on hot coals. He spent his days in brothels finding out about the whereabouts of Cuixian, once a courtesan at the House of Sumptuous Treasures.

When the time elapsed, Mao Baokun had obtained several pieces of information. Xie Cuixian was a famous courtesan. Her marriage to Lord Xu and her arrest did not leave people indifferent. Several people told him the address where she was staying with her mother. They were staying with a close relative in the alley of Liuli's pink houses. Mao learned that Xie Cuixian had been abused by the yamen and bruised in the face. She had fallen ill with sadness and was now living in great poverty, having no food. Mao Baokun doubted this information. He paid a servant from the House of

Sumptuous Treasures to lead him to her. Mao Baokun pretended to be a friend of Li Mubai's and that before his departure, he had instructed him to go to the two women.

With Huang Jibei's money, Mao Baokun had recently bought himself beautiful clothes. Lady Xie rejoiced to meet such a richly dressed man and kept complimenting him.

"We are touched by misfortune! Cuixian fell ill again. Needless to say, she couldn't see a doctor or take any medicine since we didn't even have anything to eat! Luckily, Lord Li gave us some liang of silver, and we have been able to survive until now. Cuixian took a number of medications; in a few days, she will be much better."

Mao Baokun nodded and said confidently:

"Lord Li left the capital and I don't know when he will return. Since he has assigned me to take care of you, I cannot let you endure the cold and the hunger. Tomorrow, I will come back to bring you some silver. You will be able to live, as best you can, for a while. Let's wait until Cuixian is better. I will then advise on how to find a solution for you."

He observed the young woman lying on the kang. Her face was extremely pale and showed several purplish scars. We always guessed its charm and beauty. Beads of tears clinging to the corners of her eyes, she stared at him, silent. Mao Baokun left the room. He returned to the Qingyun Hostel in Ciqikou and informed Miao Zhenshan of his wife's whereabouts.

After accompanying Mao Baokun to the entrance, Lady Xie returned and addressed her daughter:

"My child, worry no more, Li Mubai still cares about us. Although he left Beijing, he still commissioned this so-called Mao to take care of us. He seems to have even more money than Li Mubai. My darling, you are already doing much better and your facial scars are hardly visible. Tomorrow, you're going to make the effort to get up and put on makeup. When this Mao returns to offer us his money, you should treat him with courtesy. Hopefully he can often come and see us and find us a solution, either by marrying him, or by



relocating us in an establishment. As long as we have a means of subsistence, it will be fine. Otherwise, with age helping, I..."

Dame Xie then began to think of Xie Qi, her husband beaten to death, then of this sumptuous existence that they had both led in the brothel. After her daughter's marriage to Lord Xu, Lord Xu's brutal death shattered her sweet dream. She had been taken to court, had suffered punishment, lost all her possessions and had to care for her sick daughter. Going over all the vicissitudes of her life, she cried and lamented bitterly.

Xianniang, lying on the pillow, was choking on her sobs.

"Mom, do you really think we still have any way out? There is only death in front of us! When Li Mubai came to see me the other day, didn't you hear what he said? Zhumadian's old Miao will soon arrive in the capital. Miao is just a bandit who kills in cold blood. He murdered my father and made me suffer so much. How many lashes have I received from his hand? I can't imagine how much he must have hated us since our second escape. If he investigates us and finds us, he won't spare us."

Xianniang sobbed even more. At the mention of the old Miao tiger, Lady Xie was so afraid that she could not cry anymore. She could only widen her eyes."

"What? Li Mubai really said that?"

Xianniang wiped the corners of her eyes.

"He told me in person. He knows a lot of Jianghu men and wouldn't lie to me. He doesn't know about anything about us. I never told him about our past at Zhumadian."

"The old tiger is certainly coming on another matter," said Lady Xie, terrified. "He probably does not know that we have taken refuge in the capital!"

"It would be better," sighed Xianniang. "But he has a lot of knowledge, how can we be sure that he hasn't obtained information about us? In my opinion, the man who just passed by is one of his

spies: I never heard Li Mubai mention his name!"

Lady Xie looked even more flabbergasted.

"If so, maybe Li Mubai hasn't really left! I will quickly go and see the temple. If I find him, I'll beg him to save us both!"

Lady Xie looked at her daughter with teary eyes. Xianniang finally said:

"Ah! Mom, Li Mubai will never be able to care about us like he did before!"

Xianniang went into convulsions.

"Anyway, old Miao has only to come, he doesn't scare me!" she continued energetically. "The emperor's feet are treading on this city, there are laws in Beijing, he will not be able to do as he wants! At worst, he will kill us and it will all be over!"

Dame Xie saw that her daughter's brash temper resurfaced. Worried at the highest point, she decided to go find Li Mubai. Without waiting for Xianniang's consent, she hurriedly left the room to go to Faming Temple in Prime Minister's Lane.

Young Xie couldn't stop thinking about this so-called Mao. He actually looked suspicious. She had resolved to wait for Miao Zhenshan to find her before fighting him to the death. Xianniang, of fragile nature, had been bedridden for many days. She had taken advantage of her mother's absence to open her lacquered pillow, retrieve the dagger bequeathed by her father and slip it under her covers. After Lord Xu's murder, all the belongings and possessions they had accumulated were confiscated by the Xu family. However, the pillow, the dagger, as well as some old junk had been stored with their aunt. She had taken them back now. Her mother did not know she was hiding this dagger. During her unhappy existence, cornered by her feelings, Xianniang had thought to turn the blade against her. She had given it up each time, imagining the sad fate of her lonely mother. It was not the misery or the regrets of a lost love, but Miao Zhenshan, the foul beast, that forced her to take the weapon again. She had no choice but to use it against herself or to

fight. Xianniang, lying on the kang, shivered with terror while feeling a great desire for revenge. From outside, the icy wind crept in through the old weathered paper window, making sounds that made you quiver. Xianniang closed her eyes. She was in pain to the point of being numb, as if she was already dead.

Suddenly a resounding sound of footsteps arose from the courtyard. Three or four men abruptly forced the door of the small room, among them was the so-called Mao. Another individual whom Xianniang hated and feared so much was part of the lot: Miao Zhenshan, the Fish who swallowed up the Boats. She stood up immediately when she saw his ugly face, with its bristly beard. She kept shaking. She stammered:

"Why... what do you want?"

Miao Zhenshan stared at her with widening tiger eyes. He gave her a sardonic laugh. "You ran away from Henan. You failed in the brothels of the capital and you teamed up with Li Mubai: don't you think you've done too much? You are finally back in the hands of Lord Miao! I'm curious to see where you're still going to escape!" He fumed.

He was about to grab Xianniang violently, when, driven by the urgency of the situation, she picked up the dagger and hurriedly threw it at him. Miao Zhenshan put his huge hand to his face and the dagger was heard falling to the ground.

His whole right side was dripping with blood. He then grabbed Xianniang and turned to one of his men, yelling:

"Give me that blade to kill her!"

Xianniang who did not fear him exclaimed:

"Go on, kill me!"

Miao Zhenshan raised the dagger to slit her throat, when Mao Baokun intervened by restraining his arm.

"Uncle, don't get upset! Don't be in such a hurry! Now that you've found her, are you really worried that she'll run away again? If you

kill her, her mother may not stop there!"

Miao was stamping with rage:

"Finally in front of me, she makes no apologies. She dares to brandish a knife and injure my eye. How can I forgive her? I still prefer to kill her and go to court, I don't care!"

He then raised his fists and punched the young woman in the face.

At the same time, facing the icy wind, Lady Xie, who had gone to Faming Temple, where she had not found Li Mubai, was returning home. She met her neighbor Yu Er with whom she and her daughter shared the same yard. Frightened, he cried out when he saw her:

"Lady Xie, come home quickly! Several armed men broke into your house and want to kill your daughter. I run to warn the authorities!"

Lady Xie rushed forward. She passed two evil-eyed individuals in the courtyard. The tenants of neighboring rooms did not dare to leave their homes. Screams and tears came from her room. Lady Xie came running up. She then saw Miao Zhenshan, his face bloodied. He grabbed her daughter by the hair and brutalized her, like a tiger grabbing a frail lamb. She screamed immediately and threw herself on the muscular arm to hold it back.

"If you want to beat someone, start with me!"

"Old skin!" Miao Zhenshan muttered.

Freeing himself, he knocked down Lady Xie who passed out when she hit the wall with her head.

Miao picked up the dagger and put it under Xianniang's throat. Mao Baokun and the henchmen prevented him from taking action. Mao belted him and implored him:

"Uncle, you can't do this in Beijing! We do not kill someone with rage!"

Miao Zhenshan seemed to have some qualms and lowered his arm.

He threw down the dagger and wiped the blood from his face with his sleeve.

"You tell me not to kill her," he said to Mao Baokun, "but who am I going to be able to take my anger out on?"

"We can find a way to resolve this matter. She's your wife, she fled to take refuge in Beijing and become a prostitute. Once found, she dared to raise a weapon against you, injuring you. If we tell the authorities about all of this, you can get them both convicted and send them to jail."

Lady Xie had just come to her senses. She addressed Miao Zhenshan crying:

"Lord Miao, if you want to kill someone, kill me! We lived more than a year by your side, we ran away because we feared your whip. My daughter cried a lot thinking of you. She became aware of the many benefits that you had had the grace to grant us. We were hoping for your kindness. Without the fear of your whip, we would not have waited for you to find us and we would have returned to Henan. In Beijing, we wandered from brothel to brothel. We were courteous to customers, but what else could we do? We barely had enough to live on. Who would not have preferred Lord Miao's mercy?"

Faced with Lady Xie's fine eloquence, the monster seemed to think it over. He observed Xianniang who, lying on the kang, her hair disheveled and her face bruised by his fists, was sobbing. Despite her tears and panting lips, she still exuded a certain charm. What a delicious image her bare arms are! Her pale red shirt, torn in places revealing her dewy skin, troubled Miao Zhenshan. He could only reverse his decision. Luckily I didn't kill her just yet, he thought. I would certainly have had some remorse. He said, breathless:

"Do not add anything in her favor. I have wandered all my life in Rivers and Lakes, no one has ever raised a weapon against me!"

Noting that he was calming down somewhat, Mao Baokun said to Miao Zhenshan:

"Cuixian reacted with emotion. It was by accident that she hurt my uncle. She's your wife, don't you have life or death rights over her? Uncle, if you kill her, it won't be a big deal for justice; only, if everyone learns it, it will not be to your credit. If you forgive them and offer them something to look after their outfit, they will go back to Henan with you. This time, with such great favor, how dare they not be docile?"

Miao Zhenshan still furious, thought for a moment and finally nodded:

"I trust you and I am doing them a favor. Get your things ready, he said to Lady Xie. I spare you. In a few days, you will be returning to Henan with me. Did you understand me correctly?"

"Yes! Yes!" she exclaimed, kneeling down to bang her forehead against the ground. "My daughter is unfortunately not recovered from her illness, she is not getting up yet."

"If she does not get up," scolded Miao Zhenshan, "then I am going to lift her for you!"

Furious, he stared at Xianniang with a raised fist. His anger was not satisfied. Mao Baokun did everything possible to reason with him again and managed to get him out of the room.

Meanwhile, Yu Er had gone to the authorities office to look for a senior officer. As soon as the guard entered the courtyard, he exclaimed:

"What is going on? What is going on?"

Miao Zhenshan and his henchmen were about to abuse him without hesitation. Mao Baokun immediately intervened, advising them to go back to the inn to rest. He walked up to the officer, greeting him with folded hands. He smiled calmly at him and explained:

"Nothing happened. The man who just came out is Miao Zhenshan from Henan. He was invited to Beijing by the Fourth Lord Huang. These two women named Xie, who reside here, were once under the wing of Lord Miao. They cheated him a lot of money, before fleeing

to the capital, a year ago. He found them. There was a little quarrel between them just now. They have just repented and will be returning in a few days with him. As in the past, he will take care of them again. Everything is in order. My friend, you don't have to bother."

The officer realized it was Miao Zhenshan. Everyone knew that he had recently been invited by Huang Jibei to confront Li Mubai. What little officer would have dared to offend Lord Huang? He declared:

"So it's just an irrelevant story!"

He turned to Yu Er and slapped him.

"Why did you come looking for us for such a small affair!" he growled. "You were reporting a homicide case to us!"

At that time, Lady Xie walked out into the courtyard. She bowed face to the ground at the sight of the guard.

"You don't need to intervene. Lord Miao forgives us! In a few days, I will bring my daughter back. She accidentally hurt him slightly, but it wasn't intentional!"

Mao Baokun then kicked her:

"You're done, yes! Stand up! What do you have to bow down! If I hadn't intervened with Lord Miao, he wouldn't have spared you!"

He then addressed the neighbors in the courtyard, attracted by the commotion:

"Mother and daughter Xie are the wives of Lord Miao. They will stay here a few more days to recover. You will watch them and take care of them. If something happened or if they decided to end their life, you would be solely responsible!"

He particularly insisted on the attention of Yu Er and one of the gathered girls who opened wide eyes:

"Did you understand me correctly?"

Mao Baokun grabbed the officer.

"Brother," he said to him with a smile, "let's go have a few cups!"

Dame Xie did not get up until after they left. She wiped her nose and eyes on the front part of her dress.

"What miseries we suffer!"

Aunt Jin at her side scowled and exclaimed, pointing at her:

"You left Henan and found refuge with me, but how could I have guessed that you had run away from your in-laws? For over a year, I worried about you a lot. Since her husband has found you, you will go home with him. Never fuss with me again, got it?"

Lady Xie was crying hot tears. The ten or so girls Aunt Jin was educating dared not say a word, despite their compassionate demeanor. Yu Er, who had gone to get the officer and had received a slap in the face, found it all somewhat unfair.

"Aunt Xie," he said, "I think this story is not over. If you follow Miao, he won't treat you well. You better go get Li Mubai! Lord Li is a famous brave man in the capital, he knows a lot of people. He will certainly find a way to get you out of this mess."

"But that's exactly what I just did!" moaned Lady Xie. "Lord Li was not at home. How are we going to get by?"

"In my opinion," Aunt Jin said, pouting, "leaning on him won't do either, he doesn't look rich. If only His Excellency Xu and Fat Lu San were still in this world, they probably could have saved you both. But how do you manage to attract so much misfortune? You hadn't been with Lord Xu for a month before he was assassinated!"

After uttering these hurtful words, she ordered the young girls to return to their room. Yu Er felt his cheek. Decidedly not being able to resign himself, he looked for another solution. Xianniang was heard moaning and calling for her mother from the bedroom. Lady Xie wiped away her tears and went to see her daughter. Xianniang was disheveled, her bruised face full of scars. The dagger she had thrown at Miao Zhenshan had landed on the ground, and it was



with great difficulty that she recovered it to hide it again. Out of breath, she turned her gaze to her mother and said:

"Mum, if we follow old Miao, we're gone. What if... we resist him, until death ensues?"

"But how would we manage to oppose him?" Lady Xie cried desperately.

Xianniang then addressed Yu Er who had followed Lady Xie into the bedroom.

"Uncle Yu, could you not go find Li Mubai? He got along very well with the Fifth Lord De. If you were to find him, he would certainly know where his friend is!"

Yu Er agreed:

"It's true, Li Mubai is on very good terms with the Iron Hand. In the southern lowlands, he had helped him confront guards from the Chunyuan Escort Agency. Aunt Xie, you should go to the eastern part of the capital to meet Lord De. If you can't find Li Mubai anywhere, he will no doubt be able to help you."

"Li Mubai once told me that Lord De was an official in the Palace Courtyard and had a lot of influence in Beijing," Xianniang said. "Mom, you have to go see him!"

"The Iron Hand takes care of the elderly and the poor, and helps victims of injustice," Yu Er continued. "If you implore him in front of the door of his house, he cannot help but care."

Lady Xie suddenly saw a glimmer of hope. She only had to beg, bowing down on the ground, Lord De to help them. She asked Yu Er to accompany her. Her neighbor was an idle person who liked to stick his nose in other people's affairs. Feeling the victim of an injustice, he wanted to vent his anger and therefore without hesitation escorted Lady Xie. He inquired of an acquaintance of the exact address of Lord De. Facing the icy wind, he led the way. Dame Xie followed suit, crouching, tears in her eyes. They then entered the inner city (20).

They finally arrived at Santiao alley in Dongsi pailou, in front of De Xiaofeng's house. They noticed that one of the doors of the main entrance was open.

"You should go in alone," Yu Er told her. "Talk to the gate guard first. When they see the poor woman that you are, they can only be moved. If I go in with you, it won't work."

Lady Xie agreed. She walked hesitantly towards the servants at the entrance. She greeted them cordially and said:

"Excuse me, I would like to meet the Fifth Lord De. I have something to ask him. Would you be so kind as to make it easier for me and let him know?"

The two men were obviously puzzled. One of them questioned her:

"Lord De isn't home, what did you want from him?"

"What's your name," asked the other. "Have you ever met Lord De?"

"My name is Xie," she replied, wiping her nose.

She told them that her daughter, Cuixian, was once a famous courtesan of the House of Sumptuous Treasures. Lord De, along with Li Mubai, often visited them. Now they were oppressed by the old Miao tiger from Henan. They were desperate to find Lord Li. Lady Xie, in tears and a pleading voice, explained to them all the ins and outs of her story. She came to ask for the charitable help of De Xiaofeng.

## Chapter 24

*Driven by indignation, she defends the withered flower,*

*The young heroine commands respect;*

*In the cold night, she suffers, unfortunate,*

*The one with the golden hairpin is heartbroken.*

As Lady Xie told her story, the servants at De Residence looked at each other. In recent days, our master no longer sleeps and has lost his appetite because of this so-called Miao, they both thought. You show up here asking for his help, how could he grant it to you? They exchanged their impressions in a low voice:

"Our master is certainly not going to take care of this matter. We better tell her to go!"

"No, retorted the other after reflection, we cannot make such a decision. I will rather go and warn the master's wife!"

The man then addressed Lady Xie:

"Lord De came out very early this morning, we don't know when he will be back. I will inform his wife of your coming and see if you can wait for him here or if it is better if you come back another day!"

Lady Xie respectfully greeted the servant who entered the residence. He walked through the door of the private apartments and walked along the corridor. He stopped at the end, on the staircase leading to the inner courtyard. He called in the direction of the west wing, where De Xiaofeng's wife was staying.

"Messages for our superiors!"

In recent days, a certain tension reigned throughout the residence, especially when the master was not there. Servants were ordered to beware of outsiders, and had to report anything.

A maid appeared when the porter called.

"There's an old lady outside who says her name is Xie," he explained. "She would apparently know Lord Li Mubai and our master. She and her daughter are in trouble with Miao Zhenshan and she comes to ask Lord De for help. She keeps crying outside the main door. Do we let her in while we wait for Lord De to return or do we have to tell her to leave?"

"I'll ask," replied the maid, returning to the apartments.

At the same time, a young woman was coming out of the west wing. She raised her head and addressed the servant:

"Tell me, what's going on?"

She wore a long braid and wore a black dress with slit sides. Her soft eyes revealed a strong personality that forced you to lower your gaze, which the servant immediately did. His heart pounding, he replied, his voice faltering:

"Good, Miss Yu! There is an old lady outside called Xie. She says her daughter... no that's not it. She knows Lord De and finds herself forced by Miao Zhenshan to... "

Yu Xiulian, who had immediately heard the names of Li Mubai and Miao Zhenshan, did not have the patience to listen to the servant's explanations. Suddenly she said to him:

"I'm going to see her!"

She quickly walked along the corridor and quickly went to the door of the residence. The man and the maid were watching the figure move away when their mistress appeared. The latter asked what was going on outside. She seemed worried to learn that young Yu had rushed to the entrance, fearing that something would happen.

Xiulian had joined the concierge. She saw there a destitute old lady who was doing everything to make people feel sorry for her fate.

"Is your name Xie?" she asked her. "What are your reasons for addressing the Fifth Lord De?"

The entry of the young girl had terrified the servant, who immediately straightened up and was now standing with his head bowed.

Lady Xie, although presently in need, had known silk and satin. Xiulian, with her black dress, her long braid tied with a white cord and not having her feet bound, gave her the impression of being a servant. She looked her up and down. The servant then declared:

"It's Miss Yu, why are you waiting to greet her respectfully?"

Dame Xie immediately complied and began to implore her:

"Lady, help me! Pray lord De to bring Li Mubai or find another solution. The old tiger Miao will soon kill us, my daughter and me!"

The other servant reappeared and addressed young Yu:

"Lady De asks for you in the inner courtyard, she wants to talk to you!"

Xiulian paid her no attention and continued to question Lady Xie. She thus learned of the arrival of Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin, and the departure of Li Mubai. Lady Xie cried more and more tragically, recounting her misfortunes. Xiulian found her to be pitied and wanted to meet her daughter.

"Let's go to your place," she concluded. "Don't worry anymore. If this Miao Zhenshan annoys you again, I will kick him out!"

Young Yu's features revealed her uncompromising character. She turned to the servant and said:

"I'm going out, go hire me a cart!"

The man nodded and left the room, frowning.

Lady Xie, intimidated by Xiulian's tone, remained silent and opened her eyes wide. The young woman took a seat on a stool. Her charming face was pale with rage. She bit her lower lip, as if in deep thought. She ends up sighing and confessing to Lady Xie:

"You probably don't know me, my name is Yu Xiulian. In the past, I too was humiliated. But I studied martial arts and I fear no one, even the most violent do not scare me. If I want to fight Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin, it is as much to help you as to satisfy my own desire for revenge!"

After these explanations, Lady Xie did not understand who she was either. However, she bowed down several times and said:

"Miss Yu, thank you for taking pity on us!"

For Lady Xie, this young Yu must certainly have been a wealthy person, no matter whether or not she practiced martial arts. If Yu Xiulian could rescue them by giving them some money, they might be able to save themselves somewhere. Wouldn't that also be a way out?

A cart pulled by a mule arrived, the servant had no choice but to say:

"Miss Yu, the carriage is here!"

She straightened up and left the room, supporting Lady Xie by the arm. They took their places and headed west out of the alley.

Outside, Yu Er was still waiting for Lady Xie. As soon as he saw her sitting in a cart next to a simple young woman, he couldn't help but be surprised. He approached exclaiming:

"Aunt Xie, where are you going? Did you manage to meet the Fifth Lord De?"

"No, I couldn't see him, but Miss Yu is one of his relatives. She can help us. We're both going home now!"

The cart had not stopped and continued along the main street in the direction of the southern city.

Along the way, Lady Xie asked Xiulian about her homeland and her relationship to Lord De. The young girl, absorbed in her thoughts, did not answer her. Lady Xie was then complacent and flattering, and asked her many more questions.

"I have absolutely no relation to him," Xiulian finally replied. "On the other hand, Li Mubai is my adopted big brother. I will meet your daughter and find out about your situation. Be quiet! Whether it is to get you money or a job, I will always find a solution. And don't underestimate me, although I'm young, I'm absolutely sure I can crush Miao Zhenshan and his men!"

"What do you say," cried Lady Xie without delay. "You pity us and you help us, how dare I look down on you?"

Lady Xie watched her. She found her very beautiful and distinguished. If she painted herself, she would probably be prettier than her daughter. They seemed to be about the same age. But Lady Xie would have been unable to say what martial arts skills she might actually have.

They arrived at the alley of Liuli's pink houses. Lady Xie stopped the cart near her entrance. She then saw two men pacing in front of her house. Tall, with broad shoulders, open shirts, they seemed to want to conceal some saber or stick. She changed color and began to tremble in fear as if she recognized them.

"Do not be afraid!" Xiulian whispered to her.

She dismounted and begged the driver to wait for her. The latter helped Lady Xie to get out of the vehicle. Terrified, she had cotton legs. She almost fell, but Xiulian supported her.

The two followed suit to glance at Xiulian, but Xiulian didn't pay them any attention. She followed Lady Xie who entered the room. On the kang was lying a young woman in her twenties, frail and pale, her face showing many traces of tears and scars. Lady Xie started to cry at the sight of her daughter.

"I went to Lord De but did not see him. I met Miss Yu there. She took pity on us and said she could help us!"

Xianniang made an effort to stand up. She combed her hair, running her hand through her hair, observing the young girl in silence. Xiulian spoke in a neutral tone:

"Don't worry, I can chase this Miao Zhenshan away. Li Mubai is my adopted older brother. Since you know him, I must help you all the more. Besides, I have scores to settle with Miao and these men."

Xianniang listened to her but still did not understand who this young Yu could be. Lady Xie asked where Lord Li was. The name rekindled her resentment somewhat and Xiulian replied:

"Since my arrival in Beijing, I have only seen him once. I don't know where he is either!"

Xiulian thought to herself: Li Mubai is not a callous person. Why didn't he come to see me as soon as I arrived in the capital? We would have talked about the fate of these people. How could he have been so indifferent and left them like that without protection? Xiulian observed Xianniang again. She found her beautiful and delicate, no doubt she had been a famous courtesan. Li Mubai must have dated her.

Xianniang suddenly realized that it was Yu Xiulian, the charming and talented young woman Li Mubai had once told her about. He had his sights set on her, but she had long been engaged to another. Not knowing why, Xianniang suddenly felt embarrassed. She immediately thought of the elegant and sincere Li Mubai. Tears started to fall. She finally said in a distressed tone:

"Miss Yu! Thank you very much for all these attentions and for your help. Unfortunately, you do not know the old Miao tiger, he is an extremely violent being. He has many henchmen in his service who kill in cold blood. My poor father died under their blows! Young Yu, don't get yourself into trouble because of us, we would only be more sorry for Lord Li Mubai!"

Xianniang was overwhelmed by her tears. Seized with convulsions, she wiped her tears with a pink silk handkerchief.

Lady Xie got cold and tucked her hands up her sleeves, letting her nose run. She was dumbfounded for a long time. The bedroom door opened. Two young girls cocked their heads inside to glance at Xiulian. They were dressed in silk and satin clothes. Coquettably combed, they were seductively painted, red on the eyelids. They



were hardly more than fourteen years old. Their lovely demeanor and frivolous manners easily let guess that they were young prostitutes. Xiulian understood that the people residing around this courtyard were not very popular. Frowning, she addressed Xianniang:

"Don't worry anymore. I am not afraid of this Miao tiger! I have no indulgence towards this kind of tyrant!"

In the street, an argument broke out. The young girls rushed outside. Xiulian straightened up and said:

"I'll see what happens!"

You could hear a man shouting insults and lamenting:

"You just have to beat me to death!"

Lady Xie recognized her neighbor's voice and also came running.

Yu Er, who had followed their cart, had just returned. He had been grabbed by Miao Zhenshan's two henchmen. While one was kicking him, the other was pestering him with questions. They wanted to know where he had brought Lady Xie and who the young woman was. Yu Er had refused to tell them anything and only cursed them. The two individuals then tackled him to the ground to beat him. Yu Er, on the ground, could only scream and curse.

The young Xiulian arrived at this point. She picked up a long pole behind the front door. She waved it and waved it as she approached the two ruffians. She hit one of them on the head, causing blood to spurt out. The other immediately took off his shirt and took out a cutlass from his belt.

"Slender kid," he said coldly, "do you dare to raise your hand over your masters? Beware, I will crush your chest with a punch!"

Xiulian shed her tunic, remaining only dressed in her short ensemble. She hit the man several times with the stick and managed to tear the dagger from his hands. She left the pole to throw herself on him. She forcefully thrust the blade into his arm. Unable to escape, the man could only struggle desperately and let out a

scream as blood gushed from the wound.

The situation was going badly. The other guy with the shattered head slipped out towards the north of the alley. On leaving the hutong, he saw in his flight a rather thin man, dressed in a padded jacket of blue satin: it was Mao Baokun, followed by three friends. Miao Zhenshan, who had returned to his inn, was still enraged. Fearing that the two women would run away again, he had told him to return to them. Mao was to make them pack their bags and bring them back.

He had not yet reached the alley where they lived when the man who had taken a beating tumbled down.

"Lord Mao, come quickly! This old Xie brought a girl back from I don't know where. She is terrible! She grabbed a stick and smashed my head. She grabbed my companion: she is beating him!"

Mao Baokun lost his temper. Scarlet, his small eyes widened and the scar on his face was even more visible.

"What is this story?" he grumbled. "It's unfortunate that two guys like you get beaten up by a kid. It's disgraceful!"

He ran into the alley and soon saw a crowd. Miao Zhenshan's henchman, the Thundering Gaze Pang Qi, had a swollen face and bloody arm. He rushed towards him completely panicked. Mao Baokun exclaimed:

"What is that? Who is this little girl that Lady Xie brought back?"

"But I do not know!" Pang Qi cried with a grave expression. "Old Xie went out for a while and came back with her. She is terrifying, none of us could approach her!"

Mao Baokun rolled up his sleeves and said:

"Come on, follow me!"

By this time, Yu Er was busy bragging in front of the entrance and chatting with the crowd. As soon as he saw Mao Baokun accompanied by his henchmen, he rushed inside and closed the

door. He rushed into Xianniang's room and addressed Xiulian:

"Miss Yu, Mao is coming back with several men!"

"Don't worry," she replied calmly.

Then sounded a big "wham!" They were breaking down the door. Xiulian retrieved the cutlass she had just stolen and immediately left the room to open it. Yu Er and Lady Xie were terrified and gasped.

Outside, Mao Baokun and his men, their spears and shining daggers displayed, did not expect the door leaves to open. Mao, fists on his hips, discovered a young girl standing in the doorway. Dressed in a black ensemble, she looked absolutely lovely and was no stranger to him. Xiulian immediately recognized Mao-the-Sixth of Julu. She had already met him because he knew her father. She found him loathsome and never imagined seeing him here again.

"Mao-the-Sixth! she cried."What are you doing here? Are you coming to get beaten up too?"

Mao Baokun jumped in fear. He stepped back as soon as he noticed that he had in front of him the young Yu Xiulian, daughter of the old guard Yu known as the Iron Winged Eagle. He thought at first to be friendly and address a "dear little sister" to her, but changed his mind. He dared not act lightly, seeing how terrifying she was holding her cutlass. He smiled and greeted her very respectfully with folded hands.

"So it's the young Miss Yu! Hello there! I heard that my uncle Yu passed away?"

At the mention of her father, Xiulian looked grim and gritted her teeth.

"Don't waste your breath! Instead, tell me why you are helping Miao Zhenshan brutalize these two women."

"Miss Yu doesn't remember? I am Sun Zhengli's sworn brother. In Julu, my uncle Yu took good care of me. Now, I am a guard at the Sihai escort agency, and I have never done anything wrong. Old

Xie's daughter is Lord Miao's concubine. They swindled a lot of gold and silver from him and fled to Beijing, where they ended up in brothels, then with Li Mubai... Ugh! I wouldn't dare go into details in front of a young lady. These two women may seem pitiful, but, in truth, there is nothing more despicable and profiteering than they are! Lord Miao came to find them. The Xie girl then provided herself with a blade which she threw at him, injuring his face. If I hadn't been there to reason with him, he would have killed them both. I come to pick them up to bring them back with me to the hostel where Miao Zhenshan resides. In a few days, they will be returning to Henan with him. This affair does not concern you at all!"

During his speech, he noticed that the attractive young woman's eyes were shining like radiating flames. Her hand suddenly lifted the short blade; Mao Baokun immediately took a few steps back. Xiulian said firmly:

"Hurry up and get out! I know very well that you are helping Miao Zhenshan to humiliate these poor women! In addition, you dare to pass off the fake for the real! If you weren't from the same district as me, I would have skinned you already! Tell me quickly where Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin are staying so I can get my revenge!"

Mao Baokun held back his men, impressed by the young woman's fury. "We won't provoke you any longer. If you want to go find them, great." He greeted her with folded hands and said with a vile smile:

"Don't get mad at me! Although friends with Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin, I admit that today I am getting involved in an affair that does not concern me!"

Xiulian again forced him to reveal their whereabouts to her.

"They stayed at the Qingyun Inn in Ciqikou neighborhood," he replied. "Huang Jibei invited them to the capital to confront Li Mubai. But he is only a coward: the two men had not yet arrived in Beijing and he had already fled! In a few days, Miao and Zhang will fight against Qiu Guangchao and Yang Jiantang. These two really

have to worry!"

To this attempt at intimidation, Xiulian retorted coldly:

"Some may fear them, me, surely not! Tell them to come find me, if they think they are up to it! And that they stop attacking these two women!"

"Very well," he nodded, "if that's what you want. Come on, we are leaving!"

He turned to the two wounded and the henchmen accompanying him.

"Let's go back to the inn!" He told them.

The men followed him, both puzzled and indignant. They finally asked him:

"Lord Mao, are you afraid of her? This little girl, we could crush her by throwing us all at her!"

"No wonder you always have setbacks. You have absolutely no life experience. The proverb says: 'The brave will not suffer immediate defeat.' You don't know her, but her name is Yu Xiulian, she is the daughter of Yu Xiongyuan, the Iron Winged Eagle of Julu. She is well versed in the handling of swords. Even the Demoness, your master Zhang's wife, lost to her and was injured. So, as much as you are, do you still think you are up to the task? Fortunately she remembered that I was an acquaintance of her father, otherwise we certainly wouldn't be on the way home!"

The men were impressed and thought they did well this time. If they had provoked her, they probably would have paid dearly for it and no one would have avenged them.

Looking completely dejected, they returned to the Qingyun Inn in Ciqikou. In the room where Miao Zhenshan was staying, laughter and discussions were going on. Huang Jibei, accompanied by four prostitutes, came to visit him and brought some food. He also invited Feng Huai, the Iron Staff, and Feng Long, the Little Lance. Miao Zhenshan was hugging two of the young women and getting

drunk. Full of spirits, he had even completely forgotten about the wound on his face.

Zhang Yujin, the Golden Spear, proudly raised his glass. He told Huang Jibei and the congregation about his past exploits. Not long ago, as they were walking north towards Gaoyang, they had come across a puny young man, riding a black horse and armed with a precious sword. The latter had immediately started the fight. He was very talented in his art. Miao Zhenshan had managed to injure him with a dart. They had left him in agony. He was probably dead by now. According to Zhang, this man was certainly from Beijing and must have been a friend of Li Mubai. The guests, listening, thought for a moment. No one could guess who it was. Everyone knew that apart from De Xiaofeng and the beile Tie, Li Mubai had no allies in the capital.

Mao Baokun ventured to glance around the room and retraced his steps. He addressed the two wounded:

"Go clean up and change. Lord Miao is drinking and having a good time. If we tell him what just happened, he won't stop there and go immediately to kill them. The story would get too big. Let me calmly explain everything to him when the time comes."

The men were suffering and didn't want to delay, but did so and left to apply an ointment to their wounds. Mao Baokun then returned to the room to drink and chat with all the guests. He stared at the smiling prostitutes who were serving alcohol. He thought back to Yu Xiulian's fascinating but dreadful gaze and waited for the opportunity to mention the difficulties he had encountered.

After Mao Baokun and his minions left, everyone in the alley regarded Yu Xiulian as a deity. Yu Er, also crowned with a certain prestige, said to her:

"I'm sure they won't dare to come back. Miss Yu, I will take you to their inn, they must understand that it is better not to provoke us!"

"Let's wait a little longer!" Xiulian replied.

She gave Yu Er some money and begged him to go get something to

share a meal with the two women. Lady Xie then begged:

"Young lady, if they don't come back, please forget about it! Do not seek revenge. I'm just a poor old woman looking after her sick and exhausted daughter. We don't even have enough to eat. How could we spend our time irritating these men!"

Xiulian was slightly annoyed by these words, since Lady Xie had requested her to help against Miao Zhenshan's brutality. But in front of her destitution, she did not get angry with her.

"Don't worry," she said coldly, "this revenge is only for me, I won't get you involved in this!"

"What would we be afraid of?" Xianniang sighed. "Miao had my father beaten to death; in Henan, we received from his hand I do not know how many blows! We just have to die! We are not afraid. We just regret bothering you like this... "

Xianniang choked on her tears. she thought I didn't know Li Mubai left the capital without telling anyone where he was going. He may well be a martial artist and have a certain pride, unlike most of the Jianghu men he behaves like a magnanimous knight, rescuing the poor and helping them in their difficulties. If I had married him, we certainly wouldn't be in such a miserable situation! I am deeply sorry for him! This young Yu is the woman of his heart that he told me about. He couldn't marry her because she was already engaged. Yet I have the impression that she still dresses like a young unmarried girl. Xianniang was puzzled and watched her from head to toe. She seemed to her sweet, graceful and elegant, and found it hard to imagine her as an expert in martial arts. She couldn't help envying her. It seemed to her then that she glimpsed a certain glimmer of hope in her dull and lifeless life. She hoped to recover quickly and then find Li Mubai. She suddenly touched the pillow where the dagger was hidden, and thought to show it to Xiulian. She would then have told her about her childhood spent in Jianghu, to lead a perilous existence, as well as her determination to prepare her revenge during these last years. She wanted Xiulian to know that she was not just a fragile and delicate courtesan, but that her heart also harbored strong feelings. And if she had married Lord Xu, behind Li Mubai's back, it is unfortunately because she could not

have done otherwise.

She was about to reveal everything to Xiulian, when she suddenly straightened up. Putting on her overcoat, she said:

"I have to go. I'll come back to see you in the evening."

"If they all come back, what are we going to do?" cried Lady Xie in terror.

"They will certainly not come after you again. I have already explained myself with Mao-the-Sixth. If they're looking for me, they know where to find me!"

She picked up the cutlass and left. The cart was still waiting in front of the entrance. Xiulian got in and said to the driver:

"Let's go back!"

The driver, who had seen Xiulian injure the two men, was puzzled. He wondered what connection this young woman could have with the Fifth Lord De. He nodded, waving his whip. The cart headed east of town.

Along the way, Xiulian reflects: This Xianniang is really to be pitied! Since she knows Li Mubai well, why not wait until his return to marry him, once she is well? She thought back to last spring, when he had come to Julu to offer to marry her. At the time, she believed he was just a frivolous young man. During their trip, her family had passed him, and he had helped them so much afterwards. Li Mubai had escorted her and her mother to the Xuanhua government. During this journey, she had been able to appreciate his honesty and his righteousness, because he had taken care of them with all the proprieties. With his charm and elegance, as well as his exceptional mastery of martial arts, he was truly an admirable person! She wondered what Meng Sizhao could look like. According to Li Mubai and the beile Tie, he was an expert in kung fu, loyal and generous. But why had he left, when he knew she was coming to the capital? If he didn't dare meet her because he was ashamed of his modest condition, couldn't he have put himself in her shoes? She who had just lost her father and her mother, who



could no longer live with her in-laws, and who had endured a long and painful journey to find him! Xiulian was also to be pitied. Deep inside, she knew that no one could understand her. At the thought of Meng Sizhao, the urge to go looking for him immediately resurfaced. She wanted to tell him everything she had been through because of him and see his reaction. Tears ran furtively down her cheeks.

The cart passed Dongsì's pailou and two servants from the residence ran up as soon as they saw young Yu. They shouted in panic:

"Miss Yu, come home quickly! On his return, our master was informed of your release. He is very worried. He immediately sent us to pick you up to bring you back!"

Xiulian's eyes were still wet. She forced herself to smile and said:

"Why is he worried? Your master has nothing to fear!"

Xiulian suddenly realized the benevolence of De Xiaofeng and his wife. They were actually taking great care of her. The conductor, he continued to wave his whip and laughed inwardly to know the Lord De worried for this terrible young woman. She could go wherever she wanted without ever suffering any affront. The two servants just followed the cart and also returned to the residence.

Xiulian got out of the cart in front of the entrance and walked towards the inner courtyard. She bumped into De Xiaofeng, who still hadn't taken off his official clothes, and was pacing up and down the corridor, looking concerned. As soon as he saw her, he seemed relieved and exclaimed:

"Young Yu, you came home, I was so worried!"

His wife appeared and came to support her by the arm. In a tone that is half-playful, half-critical, she said to her:

"Little sister, I was worried to death! When your big brother came home, he scolded me!"

"But why?" Xiulian retorted, laughing. "How did I make it from Xuanhua to here?"

Lady De led Xiulian into the bedroom. De Xiaofeng followed suit.

"Miss Yu, there are countless vile and evil people in Beijing City. You can't even imagine what can happen here. It is more difficult to spend peaceful days here than to wander all your life up and down hill!"

Xiulian picked up a stool and sat down on it. She then took out the cutlass.

"Big brother De, I was at the home of two women named Xie. I stole this blade from Miao Zhenshan's henchmen!"

She wore a smile of satisfaction as she told him what had happened. She explained to him what relationship Xie Xianniang had with Miao Zhenshan, and how she herself had taken part in the cause of the mother and daughter, who found themselves cornered by the latter.

De Xiaofeng couldn't believe his ears. He felt uncomfortable and thought: I would never have imagined that this Cuixian was a concubine of Miao Zhenshan, the Fish that swallowed the Boats. As the saying goes: "Those who never find each other are not enemies." I regret that I took Li Mubai to run the brothels with me these two would not have met and experienced so much misfortune. Li Mubai was thrown in jail. Xianniang is plagued by disease and pays for the deaths of Lord Xu and Fat Lu San, and as if that weren't enough, Miao Zhenshan found her in Beijing. Li Mubai is still not back, and Xiulian has already taken action; I'm afraid this clash is irreversible! Heads will definitely fall! He listened to young Yu with a frown.

At the end of his explanations, tears began to roll down Xiulian's cheeks. She seemed to regret her actions. She said to him tragically:

"Fifth big brother De, you are a civil servant. I live with you and I don't have to get you into trouble. But I know those who killed my father. Zhang Yujin, He Sanhu, He Qihu, and the Demoness are currently in Beijing. I don't have the patience to wait any longer and decided to go and face them. If I win, there will be nothing to say, but if it turns out badly, I will take responsibility for my actions and not involve you in it..."

"We must untie the knots of hatred and not tighten them. Young Yu why be so rash!"

"I must avenge my father," she replied with determination, "but I also want to eliminate this tyrant of Miao Zhenshan!"

Her tears had dried. She put the cutlass away. She seemed ready to leave immediately to challenge them.

De Xiaofeng was concerned. He tried to reason with her.

"Don't be so impatient! Zhang Yujin and Miao Zhenshan are really very strong, you must not underestimate them! Miao uses darts, and is said to never miss his mark. Qiu Guang-chao experienced it. I just came to see him, his right arm has swollen enormously. He's in so much pain that he hasn't managed to sleep a night!"

Dame De looked more and more terrified. She intervened and did everything to persuade her:

"Little sister, you mustn't threaten them! They are only bloodthirsty brutes. Arrows or darts, they all know how to use them very well. If anything happened to you, we would be inconsolable!"

"I went to see the beile Tie earlier," continued De Xiaofeng. "He advised me not to provoke anyone at this time. Let's wait and see if Miao Zhenshan or his men break the laws, because the yamen can stop them. Otherwise, we will think about how to deal with them when Li Mubai returns."

"Why should we always wait for Li Mubai?" Xiulian retorted coldly.

De Xiaofeng saw that she was arrogant in nature. He thought that if she looked down on Li Mubai, she should do the same for him. He was greatly indignant and declared:

"Because if he's not there, it won't stick! Everything that is happening right now concerns him! If Huang Jibei invited Miao and Zhang to come to Beijing, it is to confront him! And this woman, Xie Cuixian, is originally his friend!"

He stared at Xiulian. She only let appear an icy smile, as if she

already had some project in mind. She seemed to relent and finally said:

"Big brother De, let's stop talking about my revenge. Earlier, at Xie's mother and daughter's house, I injured two Miao henchmen. If he sends more minions there again, it might turn out badly for them. I am not at ease."

"Don't worry," De Xiaofeng replied, "I will immediately instruct someone to warn the yamen in the southern city. On my behalf, I will ask them to send several officers to watch outside their homes. Even if Miao Zhenshan comes in person, he won't dare try anything."

He straightened up and left the room. His wife tried at length to console Xiulian. Always so sad, the young woman did not show anything and wore a reassured face.

"Ever since I got here," she said, "I've been causing you a lot of trouble!"

"Don't talk nonsense, smiled Lady De. Your older brother loves above all to meet new people and take care of other people's affairs, I know him well. And then, here we are now like two sisters! For now, you have nothing to look forward to other than the swift return of Second Lord Meng. Only your meeting will reassure us. In addition, a young woman like you, whether gifted in kung fu or not, does not have to be brutalized by men. Either way, it's not reasonable to spend your life wandering around like this!"

She started to cry for Xiulian, who bowed her head and sighed. They exchanged a few more words, then young Yu returned to rest in her room.

At the same time, De Xiaofeng was dispatching someone to the southern city to assign official guards to protect Lady Xie and her daughter. They were to watch the entrance in case Miao Zhenshan sent men to bother them. In the evening, Yang Jiantang came to see De Xiaofeng and they discussed the latest events. De Xiaofeng was desperate to find a solution.

"We cannot stop Yu Xiulian from getting revenge," said Yang Jiantang. "Who knows, maybe her art far surpasses that of Zhang and his men. As for Li Mubai, he may not return to the capital. His departure is probably not linked to Miao or Zhang: perhaps he is fleeing Xiulian?"

"I never imagined it would all turn out so badly!" De Xiaofeng sighed desperately. "Even Qiu Guangchao was seriously injured! If within a few days Miao Zhenshan and his gang have still not left Beijing, who knows what may still happen?"

The two men chatted for a long time, then Yang Jiantang returned to his hostel.

De Xiaofeng never ceased to worry. He read for a moment. His wife appeared, arriving from Xiulian's room. Seeing him alone in the room, she sat down opposite him and began to chat in a low voice:

"I just had a long chat with young Yu. She cries bitter tears and thinks about her parents. She still plans to meet Zhang Yujin for revenge."

"If she really wants revenge, I can't stop her," De Xiaofeng said sorry. "Li Mubai and I have only recently known her. She doesn't want to listen to us, what can we do about it?"

"Fortunately we were not reckless in advising her to marry Li Mubai," his wife continued, still in a low voice. "I could see that she was ready to die to preserve her chastity! She showed me a gold hairpin that she brought from her home: it is a present from Second Lord Meng to seal their union. As soon as she took it out, she started to cry; it hasn't stopped since!"

De Xiaofeng, upset, found Xiulian respectable but also much to be pitied. At the same time, he cursed Meng Sizhao and exclaimed:

"He didn't feel the slightest compassion towards this young Yu and gave way to Li Mubai. This Meng Sizhao was really not born under a lucky star!"

De Xiaofeng watched her for a long time without saying anything.

You could hardly guess the pale moonlight glow. Except for the north-westerly wind blowing, no other sound was heard. Dame De called a maid to unfurl the blankets on the bed. She asked:

"Is young Yu asleep?"

"The light in her bedroom is out," replied the maid, "she must have dozed off."

Dame De looked at the time, it was already late. She got up and went to inspect the yard, then went back to her bedroom.

## Chapter 25

*Brandishing her saber and throwing her mount,*

*The young heroine exterminates the cruel despot;*

*Speaking frankly and in a noble posture,*

*The young beile forbids the ruthless duel.*

The next day, De Xiaofeng feared that no one at the residence would be able to prevent young Yu from coming out and running into trouble. He was very worried, but had to go about his daily business. He couldn't do otherwise. He made recommendations to his wife and left for the Inner Court, accompanied by Shou'er. Of course, Lady De did not have to constantly take care of her mother-in-law and the nannies looked after her children, but the stewardship of the interior apartments took up all her time. How could she still have watched over young Yu? Xiulian changed discreetly in her room to put on her short ensemble, retrieved her two swords and slipped out of the private apartments. She walked to the building where the carts were stored, and prepared her mount herself. A servant then came running:

"Miss Yu, where are you going?"

Young Xiulian hung her pair of sabers in the saddle and replied coldly:

"I want to get on a horse and take a ride. Do you intend to prevent me?"

The servant did not dare to reply in front of the terrible gaze of the young woman. She was pulling her horse by the bridle. He went to warn the interior apartments, but Xiulian, mounted in the saddle, was already coming out of Santiao alley. She rode along the main street in the direction of the southern city.

Unlike other regions, there were many women in the city who roamed freely; all had recourse to carriages, the curtains of which

were continually lowered. Apart from a few rare country brides who ventured on horseback in the capital, no one had ever seen a young rider like Xiulian riding the streets of Beijing. Many noticed her, some onlookers even followed her mount. Everyone wondered where this charming but reckless young lady came from.

Xiulian didn't pay them the slightest attention. Appearing from the East, the rays of the sun illuminated her fine hair at the temples. The hooves hit the cobblestones. Like bronze mirrors, the sheaths of the clashing sabers echoed in unison. In the morning coolness, she quickly arrived at the alley of Liuli's pink houses.

Xiulian found that the two doors that had been forced open the day before were securely closed. She dismounted and came forward, her whip in hand, to knock on the door. She waited a long time before hearing Yu Er cry out from inside:

"Who are you looking for?"

"It's me!" She replied.

Recognizing her voice, Yu Er hastened to open the door. He was all disheveled and had put on an old padded jacket. His face bore the marks of the blows, he looked like an imp.

"Miss Yu is very early in the morning!" he exclaimed, laughing. "Come sit here! Lady Xie and her daughter are still sleeping, I will go wake them up."

"No need," Xiulian replied, waving her hand. "Tell me instead: after I left, has anything happened?"

"Has anything happened? Soon after, Miao Zhenshan's men returned to stir up trouble here. Fortunately the yamen had sent us two guards. They managed to contain them outside the door. Miao's men did not dare to take action. They kept asking where you lived, but no one told them."

"They will not have to come and get me," replied Xiulian coldly, "it is I who will go to them, this very day!"

She inquired about the way to get to Qingyun Inn in Ciqikou. Yu Er



explained it to her, while glancing at the sabers hanging from the sturdy horse's saddle. He wondered if she was really going to face the old tiger Miao.

Climbing back into the saddle, she sped the animal to a trot.

"I'm going to find them!" She declared.

She left the hutong and rode along the avenue heading east. She passed official guards on horseback who followed suit. While joking, they commented on this young woman's outfit and charm. Xiulian, a remarkable horsewoman, only had to wave her whip so that her mount started to run off at full speed, leaving the guards far behind her.

Arrived at the Ciqikou district, she slowed down the pace. Brushing her hair with one hand and restraining the bridle with the other, she walked slowly forward, not knowing she had already reached the inn. Directly opposite was a small tea house. He Qihu, his arm injured by Meng Sizhao slung over his shoulder, was sitting there having a good time. He noticed the commotion around him. Several men rushed outside saying they wanted to see a young horsewoman passing by. Curious by nature, He Qihu also went to take a look at the entrance. As soon as he recognized the young Yu, an intense fear invaded him. He thought back to the vengeful attacks on his father; each time, he had to flee from her. She was terrible and dreadful in martial arts, he knew something about it.

In front of the establishment, his men were also watching her pass.

"But what are you looking at?" exclaimed He Qihu. "This girl's name is Yu and you better not provoke her!"

He rushed inside. He saw Miao Zhenshan with his bag of darts behind his back and his sword in his hand. He had had a plaster applied to his face. Looking furious, he was just getting ready to go out.

"Uncle Miao," cried He Qihu, "hurry up and see! The old Iron Winged Eagle's daughter rides her horse down the street!"

"Of course I'm going," Miao growled. "I wanna see what kind of demon she is to scare you like that!"

Two of his henchmen accompanied him to the entrance of the inn. He saw Xiulian heading east suddenly turn around. In front of the charm of the young woman, the anger of the Fish which engulfs the Boats vanished immediately. A smirk lifted his thick beard. He sounded a strange laugh.

"They say this kid is more terrifying than a demon! I find her rather attractive! Me, Miao Zhenshan, I am going to submit her to bring her back to Henan to make her my concubine!"

He instructed a man to fetch him his robust chestnut. He hooked his sword to the saddle and stepped forward to greet the young woman. He called out to her:

"Young sister! Let's not waste our time. I, the so-called Miao, have been hoping to meet you for a long time. Get off your horse and accompany your master to drink a few cups at the inn!"

He motioned for her to follow her. Passers-by laughed at it, others were indignant.

Faced with Miao Zhenshan's disgusting appearance and inconsistency in his words, Xiulian was overcome with anger. She waved her whip in the direction of the arrogant head. Miao Zhenshan laughed and exclaimed:

"What fury! You would dare to beat your master with this tiny whip!"

He leaned down to try and grab it, but Xiulian continued to deliver several blows in his direction. This immediately irritated Miao Zhenshan, whose forehead veins swelled with rage. Furious, he gave her a terrifying look.

"Pretty wench," he growled, "you just lost the opportunity I gave you to keep face!"

No sooner had he finished his sentence than Xiulian threw herself on him to knock him down. The alezan whinnied and leaped aside,

almost stomping on him. While the young woman was about to dismount and draw one of her sabers to finish him off, the onlookers were suddenly panicked. Miao's men were running from all sides, swords and sticks in hand, to surround Xiulian. She didn't want to fight against them. She turned to flee in an easterly direction. But how could Miao Zhenshan have stopped there? He quickly got to his feet, and, without even dusting himself off, climbed back into the saddle to pursue Xiulian. Waving his whip, he screamed:

"Kid, don't go..."

Insults and profanity were heard. Enraged, Xiulian wished she could turn around and kill him. It would not be easy for her to flee through the streets of the capital if she caused some incident. She suddenly had an idea. She whirled around and smiled coldly at Miao Zhenshan:

"So stop insulting me, and follow me if you have the courage!"

Faced with this smile, as icy as it was, Miao Zhenshan felt his body all feverish and his rage dissipate immediately. He smoothed his thick beard, felt the ointment on his face and exclaimed:

"We are not talking about courage! I lost my mind as soon as I saw you. Wherever you go I will follow you!"

Xiulian, furious, spat on him and resumed her course east. Miao chased her. Passers-by observed them strangely. Miao Zhenshan ignored this and wanted to know where she was headed at all costs.

Xiulian's mount passed through the Shawo Gate (21). Miao Zhenshan followed her and also left the city. Xiulian picked up the pace, raising a cloud of dust. The alezan was finding it increasingly difficult not to be left behind. Miao suddenly pulled on the bridle and grabbed a dart from his bag. He aimed precisely at the young woman's horse, but the projectile did not hit its target, too far away. He squeezed his mount to catch it, while arming himself with a second dart. Xiulian sensed that he was using his secret weapons. She knew he was skillful and precise. Remaining on her guard, she let him come closer. Miao Zhenshan raised his hand again and

shouted:

"Come on, drop her!"

Xiulian, keen eye and quick hand, grabbed the dart before it hit. Miao jumped in amazement, but hurried out a third. A whistling sound then sounds and a pain invades his chest. He let out a shout and, seized with dizziness, fell from his horse. His mount stomped on him. Lying across the dusty road, Miao Zhenshan was unconscious. Xiulian drew a sword and approached. Mercilessly, she sliced off one of his legs with several blows of the blade. He had no reaction. Blood was squirting from his thigh. In the distance, people were arriving. Xiulian put away her sword and fled by another route.

She went at most a dozen li before slowing down. She paused for a moment. She thought she had killed Miao Zhenshan and was happy about it, but feared that she had caused De Xiaofeng some trouble. The rays of the sun illuminated the south. She succeeds in locating herself. The surroundings were nothing but parched and fallow fields. At the south-eastern corner of the rampart of the inner city stood a watchtower, the battlements of which were arranged in a sawtooth pattern. She headed north. She paused for a moment to think. It was best to get into town and go back to the De's. She got off her mount to inspect her clothes and scabbards, looking for any traces of blood. Finding none, she was reassured. For more than half a li she held her horse by the bridle,

She walked through the Dongzhi gate and inquired about the direction to take to reach the Third Lane in Dongsì Pailou. Crossing several hutongs, she finally arrived in front of the entrance to the residence. Shou'er, who was on the lookout, exclaimed as soon as he saw her:

"Young Yu, you are finally back! Hurry back home! Our master has just returned and he has heard that you have been out on horseback. He is very angry and berated the servants at the entrance!"

Unperturbed, Xiulian dismounted from her mount, which she entrusted to Shou'er after retrieving her swords. With her graceful

and slender step, she entered the interior courtyard and returned to her room to lay down her arms and change. She then went to De Xiaofeng's apartments. He and his wife were extremely worried.

He exclaimed, frowning:

"Young Yu, you must never go out alone again! If something happens to you, we will never dare to appear in front of Meng Sizhao again."

"My mother-in-law heard you went on horseback," Lady De continued. "She lectured me for not having looked after you seriously. She reminded me that you were a young girl who was not yet married. If you went out alone, it's because we hadn't taken care of you enough. In the street, there are many vile people. If something happens to you, what can we do?"

Xiulian, who had just killed Miao Zhenshan, still had an aftertaste of murder in her heart. She was moved when she heard mention of Meng Sizhao. It touched her that De Xiaofeng's mother cared so much about her. A few tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Fifth big brother, big sister, don't worry about me," she sighed. "From now on, I will be more careful and measured! I'm going to see your mother!"

She walked over to the old lady's room. De Xiaofeng remained concerned.

"If she stays here, I'm sure something's going to happen to her! Li Mubai and Meng Sizhao are not coming back. What am I going to do?"

"Why not send her back to her in-laws in the Xuanhua government?" proposed Lady De.

"There would be this solution, he replied after thinking for a long time. But I still hope for the return of Meng Sizhao so we can finally reunite the young couple!"

Shou'er then appeared in the room and announced:

"Lord Yang is here!"

"How is it that Yang Jiantang arrives so early?" De Xiaofeng said.

He hurried to the reception hall in the outer courtyard. He immediately noticed his friend's unusual attitude. His padded jacket was open and gave a glimpse of a tight outfit, used for the practice of kung fu. The escort guard Sun Qi, called the Iron Head, accompanied him as well as a henchman who carried his Divine Lance to him with the long white handle, adorned with black fringes.

As soon as Yang Jiantang saw his friend in his eggplant-colored Nanking silk robe, his black velvet jacket with a high collar, his mandarin boots on his feet, he exclaimed:

"Big brother, you haven't taken off your official clothes yet, but get ready! Zhang Yujin will surely arrive to avenge his uncle!"

He looked furious and couldn't keep still. De Xiaofeng, puzzled, questioned him:

"What's happening?"

"So you don't know?" Yang Jiantang wondered. "Tell me, has young Yu come home?"

De Xiaofeng's face fell. He asked in a low voice:

"Could it be possible that, upon release, Yu Xiulian killed Miao Zhenshan?"

"She lives with you and you don't even know about her actions," Yang Jiantang sighed. "Yesterday, she injured two of Miao's henchmen in front of the Xie Family's home at Liuli Pink Houses Alley. Mao Baokun arrived and realized that it was young Yu. He returned to the hostel where Miao was staying to tell him. There, Miao must have been pretty drunk because he didn't go find her immediately. Zhang Yujin and his men went to the alley but did not see her. They did not dare to cause mayhem because guards were posted in front of the house. That was yesterday. Today, I heard that at dawn, Xiulian, armed with her swords, went on horseback to

their hostel in Ciqikou to provoke them. Taken by excess of anger, Miao Zhenshan set off in pursuit of young Yu. He chased her past the Shawo Gate, which he never passed back in the opposite direction. Out of town looking for him, his henchmen found him in the middle of a road, injured and in agony. He had only a tiny breath of life left when they brought him back to the inn, where he eventually passed away. Zhang Yujin is of course furious. He gathered Huang Jibei, Mao Baokun and all the others to discuss the whereabouts of young Yu and thus avenge his uncle!"

De Xiaofeng was stunned but delighted. He burst out laughing:

"All his life, Miao Zhenshan has been a tyrant. I don't know how many people died under his darts. I never imagined that he would die under the hand of Yu Xiulian! This girl is remarkable. No wonder Li Mubai calls her extremely talented!"

De Xiaofeng could not contain his joy and gestured in all directions. Yang Jiantang asked him again:

"But in the end, did young Yu come home, yes or no?"

"She recently returned."

"Well, after such an event, tell her to come, there's no need to keep her away. Let's discuss together a way to counter Zhang Yujin."

De Xiaofeng nodded and went to retrieve her personally. He was quickly back in the reception hall with her. Yang Jiantang observed the young woman. He seemed to show her respect for what she had accomplished. He found her quite admirable. Xiulian put on a beaming face and smiled gracefully, visibly satisfied.

"I did kill Miao Zhenshan, but I am not resigning myself," she declared. "The death of this tyrant did not satisfy my desire for revenge. It will only be fulfilled when Zhang Yujin and the He brothers, who pushed my father to his grave, are no longer in this world!"

Her tears flowed and she wiped her face with a handkerchief.

"I don't care if I end up in court or have to fight at the risk of my

life," she continued, "I am ready to bear the consequences of Miao Zhenshan's death. Fifth big brother De, Third big brother Yang, you can not help me!"

"Zhang Yujin is a famous hero of Henan," exclaimed Yang Jiantang, "he and his men have questionable intentions. They will never dare to come to the yamen for this matter, however, I'm afraid a clash is inevitable."

Yu Xiulian hadn't replied yet, but De Xiaofeng added:

"Zhang Yujin never impressed us. Only Miao Zhenshan's darts posed some difficulty for us. What do we have to fear now? On my own, I can overcome Huang Jibei and Mao-the-Sixth. Jiantang, can you and young Yu beat Zhang Yujin?"

"It's very likely," replied Yang Jiantang. "But we have to be careful. They have a lot of henchmen!"

Xiulian rested her hands on the table and, with her unruffled smile, she said:

"Whatever their number, I don't fear them at all!"

Yang Jiantang was about to speak when a servant abruptly barged in. Completely panicked, he addressed De Xiaofeng:

"Master, there is a man outside who says his name is Zhang Yujin. He is accompanied by several fellows and they are all armed with sabers and spears. He says he wants to talk to you about an urgent matter!"

De Xiaofeng changed color. Furious, Xiulian immediately straightened up and exclaimed as she walked outside:

"I will see them!"

Yang Jiantang stepped across the door.

"Young Yu, you shouldn't rush," he advised her. Let me meet them first with De Xiaofeng. Let's wait and see if they really want to fight, you'll always be in time to lend us a hand!"



"He is right," concludes De Xiaofeng. "Young Yu, return to the interior apartments."

The two men hurried to the entrance, followed by Sun Qi, the Iron Head, and the spear bearer.

Xiulian walked out of the reception hall. She was enraged and clenching her teeth. She was convinced that if Zhang Yujin showed up here with his men, it was by fate so she could avenge her uncle. Why couldn't she meet him? Whether he got into a fight or whether he drags her to court, she would take it all. An idea suddenly crossed her mind: We are at De Xiaofeng's, a wounded man in front of his house would get him into trouble. He remains a civil servant of integrity, whose reputation is well established. Since I arrived, I have resided with him, receiving from his wife and mother all their attention and respect. If he found himself imprisoned because of me, I would have a really bad conscience! She ultimately did not dare to venture to the entrance. She remained in front of the separation door of the interior apartments, listening to what was going on outside. The people on the threshold seemed numerous, but the tone of their discussion did not seem to be rising. She knew that the two sides had not yet started to fight. She preferred to withdraw under the corridor where she waited, anxious.

After a long time, Shou'er entered the corridor. She hastened to question him:

"How's it going outside? Do you think Zhang wants to engage in combat with the two lords?"

"It's unlikely, he's being reasonable," Shou'er replied. "They are in the midst of talks!"

Xiulian looked somewhat disappointed. Could it be possible that Zhang Yujin does not dare to fight? she thought.

As she was about to go and sneak in to listen to what they were saying to each other, the sound of footsteps and words suddenly arose in the outer courtyard. De Xiaofeng and Yang Jiantang, with a proud smile on their lips, returned to the private apartments. Xiulian walked up to meet them.

"Has Zhang Yujin left?" she asked.

"Indeed," smiles De Xiaofeng. "Jiantang, did you hear his arguments? I'd give my hand to be cut that it is Huang Jibei who is behind all this and pushed him to come."

While discussing, they returned to settle in the reception hall. Shou'er served the tea. De Xiaofeng sighed many times then addressed the young woman:

"I talked a lot with Zhang Yujin. He's a reasonable person. He knows you killed Miao Zhenshan. Huang Jibei told him that I personally invited you from Yanqing to oppose them, but we don't care. Zhang Yujin wants to fight you to the death. A duel in Beijing is not possible. He proposed for the day after tomorrow at dawn, a fight outside the city, beyond the Jihua gate, at the third fork. I naturally accepted on your behalf!"

Xiulian was so excited that she clapped her hands.

"But it's perfect!" she cried. "The day after tomorrow, I will finally meet him! I will be able to avenge my father, if he wants to fight to the death!"

"We will accompany you with Yang Jiantang. I find Zhang Yujin not such a bad guy. He looks nothing like that dastardly Miao Zhenshan. During the duel, crush him, you don't have to come to the point of killing him!"

"It's true that they gave the Old Eagle a hard time," Yang Jiantang continued, "however, it could be said that your father died of old age, so let's not talk about irremediable revenge!"

Xiulian was happy to finally be able to face Zhang Yujin. But the two men's joint efforts to prevent her from securing her revenge and the evocation of her late father suddenly saddened her. She started to cry bitterly again. Yang Jiantang insisted:

"The heroes of the Rivers and Lakes must not be too excessive in their actions, otherwise the hatreds would be perpetuated without being able to be unraveled for thousands of years. Fighting against

Zhang Yujin and his clique remains a secondary matter. The most urgent thing right now is to find Second Lord Meng and bring him back here."

Xiulian found his words sincere and quite sensible. Only, at the end of her patience and with a broken heart, she sobbed even more. De Xiaofeng worried and gave his friend a look to prevent him from adding any more. He tried to comfort her, then invited her to return to her room.

After the young woman's departure, De Xiaofeng remonstrated with his friend:

"You shouldn't have mentioned Old Guard Yu or Meng Sizhao. Do you not know then that she is very unhappy? She can't stand being talked about."

With a smile on his face, Yang Jiantang said despite himself:

"Hey! How do you see the future? Would you like to pass over Meng Sizhao's case in silence? I would be surprised if you plan to have her stay with you forever!"

"That such a young girl lives too long with me is not suitable, besides, she will probably not have the patience to stay. For now, we can only wait for the departure of Zhang Yujin from the capital and the return of Li Mubai to discuss all this. If we don't find her fiancé, Yu Xiulian will have to go back to her in-laws in Xuanhua."

The two men spoke at length and the discussion continued over lunch, accompanied by a few cups.

After the meal, Yang Jiantang sent Sun Qi and the spear bearer back to the inn. He joined De Xiaofeng in visiting Qiu Guangchao in the west of the city. Their friend's injury was already much better. The young marquis was delighted to see them and chatted readily with them, seated on his wooden bed. De Xiaofeng informed him of Miao Zhenshan's death and of the agreed duel with Zhang Yujin. Qiu Guangchao welcomes this news.

"This brute has spent his life wounding his opponents with secret

weapons. He was finally struck down. Huang Jibei had invited him along with Zhang Yujin with the intention of subduing all the warriors of the capital on his behalf. Once Miao and Zhang left, Huang Jibei would have found himself alone to rule the city. So far, nothing has happened that he can benefit from. Since the death of one of them, I guess he bites his fingernails!"

He smiled at his friends, but sighed soon after:

"I, Qiu Guangchao, played the hero for several years in the capital. I never imagined getting hurt the first time I met these bandits from Henan. I realize my poor abilities. I really feel impressed by the talents of young Yu Xiulian!"

De Xiaofeng tried to comfort him. Miao Zhenshan had taken him with a concealed weapon. Despite his injury, it couldn't be considered a loss.

"Guangchao," Yang Jiantang continued, "don't doubt our talents for a moment. The day after tomorrow, young Yu will face Zhang Yujin. If she wins, it will not be right for us to claim victory too. But if Zhang Yujin has the upper hand, I won't be able to let him go. We will face each other with spears to determine who is stronger!"

"If I can get up," Qiu Guangchao smiles, "I will come and watch the duel and wholeheartedly encourage young Yu!"

The three men chatted for a while. Qiu Guangchao felt weary and his friends then took their leave. On the return, De Xiaofeng said:

"We should visit Second Lord Tie and tell him everything that happened. There has already been a death in this story and who knows what may still happen the day after tomorrow. I don't care if I lose all my possessions, but the beile is an honorable person. Recently he has had frequent contact with us. If he got involved because of us, that would be extremely unfortunate!"

"Well, I will go back to the hostel," replied Yang Jiantang. "Go without me!"

"It might be better," De Xiaofeng agreed after some thought.

De Xiaofeng rode his own cart to the beile Tie, while Yang Jiantang hired a vehicle. On the way, De Xiaofeng had lowered the curtain for fear of falling on Huang Jibei or Zhang Yujin: he was afraid of paying dearly for being alone.

He arrived shortly after. The servants at the entrance begged him to be patient in the library. When the beile Tie received him, he did not allow him to speak and declared with a serious and severe air:

"Xiaofeng, your business is getting too big. You quarrel with Huang Jibei, you fight against Zhang Yujin, nothing stops you. How is it that there was a death? I have just walked home with His Excellency Governor Mao."

De Xiaofeng, stunned, replied with a weak smile:

"For the past few days, I have suppressed my anger. I only did work and hardly went out. I never imagined it would turn out that way. I failed to keep young Yu Xiulian at home, and she caused some disturbance. Miao Zhenshan is dead, but Zhang Yujin does not want to press charges. He preferred to agree to a duel with young Yu for the day after tomorrow, beyond the Jihua gate."

The beile was so outraged that he found the situation almost laughable.

"It is a scandal!" he replied. "Young Yu lives with you and you tolerate her setting off on horseback, armed with her sabers, to take revenge in the middle of the street and kill a man! Do I have to remind you that we are in Beijing? And that you remain a court official?"

De Xiaofeng was stunned by Beile Tie's words and had to sit down. He sat in his thoughts for a long time, frowning. He's right, he told himself. I should let Xiulian leave my home so that she can do as she sees fit. Then he changed his mind: I brought her back to Beijing to marry her to Li Mubai. I found myself the enemy of Huang Jibei and Zhang Yujin because of him. Definitely, being faithful to your friends implies not having family or property. Nonetheless, I am ready to do anything to help Yu Xiulian. As he was about to justify himself vehemently, the beile exclaimed:

"Governor Mao instantly came to tell me that these stories were making too much noise and that he was going to intervene. He heard that Yu Xiulian was Li Mubai's wife, and Li Mubai was in hiding but still resided in town. For him, it was Li Mubai and Yu Xiulian who were behind the murders of Lord Lu San and Assistant Minister Xu."

"But where did he get that from?" asked De Xiaofeng frightened. "During the assassination of Fat Lu San and Lord Xu, Li Mubai was seriously ill, and Yu Xiulian was still with me in Yanqing!"

"This matter has remained a mystery until now and it is not the right time to talk about it. I explained to Governor Mao what your relationship is with Li Mubai and Yu Xiulian. He didn't suggest anything more. He instructed me to tell you to keep quiet and not to confront him again. In a few days, he will order Zhang Yujin and his men to leave the capital."

De Xiaofeng understood that this was certainly a scheme on the part of Huang Jibei. Now that Miao Zhenshan was dead, Zhang Yujin could no longer help him get revenge. Overwhelmed by this turn of events, Lean Buddha Amida had to appeal to Governor Mao to sort out his problems. De Xiaofeng rejoiced and exclaimed:

"The Second Lord should know that I have been staying away lately and that Miao Zhenshan has been invited by Huang Jibei. Since this is a request from His Excellency Mao and counsel from the Second Lord, I am no longer going to court. I will stay at home and watch Yu Xiulian so that she does not cause further incidents. If Zhang Yujin, the Golden Spear, shows up at my residence, I will keep the doors closed and let him rage on his own!"

"Good," said the beile appreciatively, "you can go home! And above all, watch carefully over this young Yu. If another incident happened, I would have a hard time intervening!"

De Xiaofeng nodded. He then took his leave and drove off again. He felt relieved. Huang Jibei, he said to himself, I think you lost this time! You spent a lot of energy inviting Miao Zhenshan and his gang: result, you didn't find Li Mubai and you still haven't tried

anything against me. Your guests could only hurt your friend, Qiu Guangchao, and mourn the death of Miao Zhenshan. If indeed Governor Mao decides to expel Zhang Yujin from the capital, I would like to see what you look like! But you are devious and treacherous. I'm afraid you won't resign yourself so easily. I'd better stay on my toes. The cart was already set north of Dongsi Avenue, and would arrive at the residence in a moment. Suddenly, the conductor Fuzi raised the curtain and addressed his master:

"Lord, wouldn't that be the Fourth Lord Huang in front of us?"

De Xiaofeng pulled the curtain aside to look outside and did indeed recognize the brand new vehicle pulled by spotted mules, which was heading nimbly south. You seem in a hurry to me Huang Jibei, he said to himself, puzzled. What case are you still plotting?

Shortly after, Fuzi stopped in front of the entrance to the house. De Xiaofeng dismounted and returned home. He ordered the servants to announce his absence and to escort anyone who came in, apart from his closest friends. He then went to his apartments and wrote a message for Yang Jiantang. He finally considered how to warn Xiulian of the ban the beile Tie had enacted for the duel.

## Chapter 26

*In the freezing night, sabers are brandished,*

*Alone, she chases intrepid thieves;*

*The soul of a knight is dying,*

*His words abound and touch his friend.*

The cart De Xiaofeng had just passed was indeed Huang Jibei's. Lean Buddha Amida has been struggling lately. He was particularly busy that day. He first went to the southern city to the Qingyun Inn to witness the shroud being put on Miao Zhenshan's body. Then, because he had heard that the governor wanted to expel Zhang Yujin and his men from the capital, he returned to the inner city to offer some bribes.

He had gone to the yamen and thus hoped to end this complicated situation. He also thought he would anger Zhang Yujin to incite him to attack De Xiaofeng and his friends, using unscrupulous methods. On the avenue, Huang Jibei had also noticed the Iron Hand vehicle. De the Fifth, try to find a way out! Either way, our hatred is now unwavering. He returned to the southern city to the Chunyuan agency. He instructed Feng Long to invite Zhang Yujin.

The Golden Lance arrived soon after. Huang Jibei immediately feigned a worried expression.

"I went to the yamen," he said, "but I did not meet His Excellency Mao there. I was told that he had visited an acquaintance outside the city, but I rather think he refuses to see me. This is certainly a trick of the Fifth Lord De, he growled, waving. On the one hand, he instigated this young woman who resides in his home to kill Miao Zhenshan, on the other, he asks for help from the yamen, distributes money, and claims that your past is unclear. He wants to force you to leave the capital. He can then get Li Mubai out of his hole and dictate his law in Beijing. I'm sure the woman he's hosting is of dubious origin! What is she doing with him?"



Zhang Yujin, not at all upset, said about Yu Xiulian, "I know very well who this young Yu is. She and her father are personal enemies of my family. No matter who meets who, all our loved ones are brought to confront each other. That's why my uncle died, I'm not upset about it and I don't hate her. On the other hand, I met this De Xiaofeng and Yang Jiantang today at his residence. They were courteous. I mentioned the desire to duel with young Yu and De Xiaofeng immediately agreed on her behalf. He himself fixed the place and the date. The meeting will take place the day after tomorrow at dawn, at the third fork beyond the Jihua Gate. I found him magnanimous, how could I have imagined that he was fooling me! In the process, he rushed to the yamen to appeal to those responsible using his influence and power!"

Zhang Yujin's hatred was growing. Huang Jibei took the opportunity to insist:

"De Xiaofeng is a Manchurian, working in the Courtyard of the Palace. He is wealthy and influential, no one would dare to provoke him. Currently, he maintains Li Mubai, Yang Jiantang and this young Yu to be his henchmen. Brother Zhang, if you leave town, I will never live in peace again. I will suffer the wrath of De Xiaofeng and will probably have to flee."

Zhang Yujin growled:

"I won't let him do it! Even if we have to leave, I will never forgive him!"

He invited Huang Jibei to go out with him. They exchanged a few words behind the backs of the Feng brothers and he left the place. He returned to the Qingyun Inn. Miao Zhenshan's body had already been put into a coffin. The two had always gotten along well and had lived together for many years, helping each other - it was thanks to him that he had achieved such great fame. They had come together to the capital. Not only had he not met Li Mubai but his uncle had also perished. De Xiaofeng appealed to the yamen to expel them from Beijing. Zhang Yujin was thinking about the treacherous trap he could set for her. He Sanhu, He Qihu, He Jian'e, and Miao Zhenshan's men were so enraged that they couldn't swallow anything.

He Sanhu said:

"You all heard what the yamen people said! They give us until tomorrow to get out of the capital, otherwise they will arrest us all and condemn us. Damn, this place really doesn't make any sense! Could it be possible that Miao Zhenshan died for nothing? Are we going to just let it go?"

Galvanized by these words, his companions grabbed their weapons to fight De Xiaofeng and Yu Xiulian. Zhang Yujin stopped them:

"In Beijing, we will never be able to face De Xiaofeng. There is indeed another way to make him pay, and even twice..."

He explained to them the cruel plan he had devised. He Sanhu and the others approved of it but still had a hard time being patient.

In the evening, Huang Jibei asked his steward Hao San, the Ox's Head, to bring them money for their trip. Zhang Yujin accepted it and advised his men to prepare their things. They would leave the capital the next day at the first light of the sun. Then he sent someone to find Mao Baokun. The latter, who had learned of Miao Zhenshan's death, had already gone into hiding, which did not fail to annoy Zhang Yujin and his men.

The next day, it was barely dawn when they rented a cart, set up Miao Zhenshan's coffin there, and left Beijing through the Zhangyi Gate. Lean Buddha Amida had already sent Hao San and several of his servants to the suburbs to arrange an altar, welcome the coffin and organize a funeral ceremony. Zhang Yujin and his gang thanked him for this gesture and felt he deserved to be one of them. The procession, which included ten carts and twenty horses, then set off again.

They progressed until lunch. Zhang Yujin then told He Qihu and He Jian'e to continue south with the convoy. Accompanied by He Sanhu, the Iron Pagoda, and a capable and strong servant, he returned to the capital. They stopped near the Jihua Gate and found an inn to rest. They made it very discreet. At supper time, Zhang Yujin and He Sanhu hid short blades and re-entered the inner city. In the Third Lane of Dongsì Pailou, they moved into a small tea

house where they listened to a storyteller. They planned to stay there until late in the day and then carry out their treacherous plan by assassinating De Xiaofeng and Yu Xiulian.

That day, knowing that Zhang Yujin and his gang had been driven from the capital by the yamen, De Xiaofeng found it obvious that the duel did not take place. He felt light, as if all his worries and fears had vanished. Only the future of young Yu Xiulian remained unanswered.

Dame De, noticing that her husband seemed more relaxed than usual, chatted cheerfully with him. The two young lords were at their side. Deep in thought, De Xiaofeng observed his sons, one about twelve years old, the other seventeen, eighteen years old.

"Our family and that of Huang Jibei are now enemies," he said finally, "that's my only concern. Our children should learn to defend themselves, I'm afraid Huang Jibei will come after them later!"

"What else does this Huang Jibei want?" retorted Lady De. "I can hardly believe he is trying to kill your children!"

"You don't know him," De Xiaofeng replied. "Huang Jibei is really devious. He can't do anything against me right now, but he's able to wait a long time to set a trap for our children. As Manchus, our sons will also be going on missions for the Court. It would be better if they practiced kung fu so as not to be bullied in the future."

"In that case, you just have to train them. You always told me that you have to learn martial arts from an early age!"

De Xiaofeng could only smile at this remark.

"They won't have a hard time reaching my low level. They should recognize Li Mubai and Yu Xiulian as masters. I sincerely hope that Li Mubai will marry her. As soon as the couple move to Beijing, they will teach martial arts to our children."

As De Xiaofeng expressed his most joyful wish, the curtain opened and a maid entered announcing:

"Young Yu is here!"

Husband and wife both straightened up. With her graceful step, Yu Xiulian entered the room, still wearing her long black robe. De Xiaofeng was afraid that she had heard what he had just said. He lifted the lantern to light her charming face. She didn't seem to be as melancholy and sad as the other times. The couple asked her to sit down. The maid served tea. Xiulian asked De Xiaofeng:

"Big brother, are we going to go outside the capital tomorrow or not?"

"It won't be necessary anymore," he replied. "Today, Zhang Yujin and his men were driven out of town by official authorities. They even took Miao Zhenshan's coffin with them."

De Xiaofeng kept smiling. He picked up his water pipe from the table and lit it. He took a little puff, then continued:

"Zhang Yujin and his companions committed crimes in Jianghu. They fear the official authorities. In fact, when Miao Zhenshan died, they were careful not to press charges. This time, the yamen officials expelled them. I'm sure this is a scheme by Huang Jibei, who has not benefited from their coming so far. He used this trick to get rid of these men. Zhang Yujin can't do anything on his own anymore. Unable to help him, he risked creating many problems for him. In any case, I am sure that after he leaves, Zhang Yujin will never come back to quarrel with us. As for Huang Jibei, he will probably not give up his plan for revenge. From now on, it doesn't matter who wants to oppose me, he will never be able to defeat you, young Yu."

Xiulian nodded, biting her lower lip. She was silent for a moment, then said:

"Big brother, I plan to go away one of these days. I would first like to go to the village of Yushu to burn some sheets of offering paper on my father's grave. Then I would go back home to Julu."

Lady De, who could not bring herself to see her go, asked her:

"Little sister, reassure me: you will come back to Beijing afterwards, won't you?"

The young woman sighed, De Xiaofeng frowned.

"If you want to go, I won't stop you. But I advise you to wait for Li Mubai's return, in the name of your past friendship. And then he met Second Lord Meng, you better talk to him. Besides, if anything happened to you after you left, it would be hard for me to present myself in front of Li Mubai or young Meng."

The mention of the two men saddened Xiulian, who wiped her eyes with her handkerchief. She changed the subject, then returned to her room.

The room she occupied was a small library, very clean and tidy. She had been living there for more than two weeks. After Miao Zhenshan died and Zhang Yujin left, she wondered what she was still doing here. She thought back to what De Xiaofeng had insinuated, who hoped Li Mubai would marry her. She suddenly felt her face on fire. She remembered last spring in Julu. Her father was on his guard. It was during this period that the young lord of the wealthy Liang family came to bother them so brazenly. One evening, without her really understanding why, he had climbed onto the roof of the house. She had discovered him and had knocked him down in the courtyard with a kick of her heel. If her father hadn't intervened, she certainly would have killed him. Sun Zhengli slapped him a few times before letting him go. Deep in her memories, she tilted the oil lamp and looked out the window.

Outside was blowing an icy wind. As it infiltrated through the paper opening, it emitted mournful whistles. The flame flickered, as if about to go out, giving the room a sad atmosphere. Xiulian suddenly thought: Zhang Yujin, He Sanhu, the Demoness are all notorious thieves who can jump on rooftops and walk on walls. Have they really resigned themselves to leaving the capital? Would they not rather take advantage of the night to break into the residence and come and kill us? With that reflection, she took her sabers out of their scabbards and placed them near the bed. She raised the lamp to scan the ground; the sharp edges of the blades reflected the glare of the light. Her swords had been forged three years before - her father had entrusted this task to a friend of his. Xiulian had killed Miao Zhenshan, the Fish that Swallowed Ships the previous day, and the tyrant's blood still seemed to appear in

spots on the razor-sharp blades. She felt a certain pride in it. No one had ever been able to stand up to her except Li Mubai. Li Mubai... Every time she thought of him, she felt a sense of admiration mixed with gratitude. As she grabbed her two sabers, tears unconsciously began to flow.

In the distance the third watch was already ringing, the oil in the lamp would soon be completely consumed. Xiulian quietly closed the door to the room. She was about to blow out the flame to go to bed when she heard Dame De scream. A disorderly sound of chairs and tables being knocked over immediately followed, then the characteristic sound of clashing weapons. She then heard De Xiaofeng exclaim:

"My name is De and I am going to slay you!"

Sabers in hand, Yu Xiulian quickly left the room and saw in the darkness three figures fighting in the courtyard.

"Big Brother De, step aside and let me run them through!" She yelled.

De Xiaofeng immediately threw himself aside and rushed back to the bedroom with his wife. Dame De had taken refuge behind the overturned table, deeply gashed by a blade. The tea vases and bowls had shattered on the floor. De Xiaofeng helped his wife up.

"Are you hurt?" he hastened to ask her.

"No, no," replied his wife, trembling from all her limbs.

"Do not be afraid!" He said, straining his ears outside.

In the courtyard, the sabers still clashed violently. The two bandits exchanged a few words, screaming.

De Xiaofeng was about to join young Yu to lend a hand, when his wife grabbed his arm. He followed the scene from afar, anguished, the weapon raised. In the inner courtyard, several servants began to shout thief. Xiaofeng said through the window:

"Zhang Yujin, be reasonable! Lower your weapons! I, De Xiaofeng,

am going out. We can speak fairly well. Why use this kind of means?"

De Xiaofeng had not yet finished his sentence when he heard walking on the tiles. All the glass and paper windows in the room shook. He rolled his eyes and waited a moment. The noise died down and he soon heard no more movement. Dame De then let go of his hand and he let out a deep sigh.

Shou'er and the other servants had all woken up with a start. Dressed quickly, lanterns in hand, they hurriedly arrived in the interior apartments. De Xiaofeng put down his sword and walked out of the room to talk to them.

"Don't worry, it's okay! Let's not scare my old mother!"

De Xiaofeng's mother, a little hard of hearing, had noticed nothing, and the two young lords, watched over by maids, were still sleeping soundly. De Xiaofeng walked around the residence. Fortunately, everyone was safe and there did not appear to be any damage. Only Yu Xiulian, who went in pursuit of the individuals, had not returned, and this visibly worried De Xiaofeng. He sent several men to patrol the area. He then returned to his rooms, where he sat down, feeling the backlash of what had just happened.

Dame De was barely recovering from her emotions. She questioned her livid and tormented husband:

"But who are these individuals?"

"One of the two is Zhang Yujin. Fortunately, my saber was ready and I quickly retaliated, otherwise I would already be out of this world. You could see how violent this man is!"

He touched the deep gash left in the rosewood table.

Dame De, mulling over what had just happened, trembled again, terrified. She was about to beg him never to hang out with the people of Jianghu again, when Shou'er and other servants cried out from the court:

"There's someone on the roof!"

De Xiaofeng, distraught, picked up his sword. He was about to rush outside, when a delicate voice exclaimed in a severe tone:

"It's me! What do you light up with your lanterns?"

"Young Yu," Shou'er replied immediately, "have you caught up with the thieves?"

"Go back to bed, it's nothing!"

After coughing, Yu Xiulian entered the couple's bedroom. De Xiaofeng put down his blade and said:

"Ah! Young Yu is back!"

By the light of the lamp, De Xiaofeng observed Xiulian from head to toe. She carried her sabers under her arm. Her hair was slightly messy in the wind. She left her weapons in a corner of the room and huffed.

"I chased them beyond the Jihua Gate," she said. "They sped along the main road and then suddenly started throwing bricks at me. I did not advance further. Their saber technique is very poor, their gestures are very clumsy. They couldn't do anything against me. If there had been only one, I would have captured him a long time ago."

The young woman, who went in pursuit of them, had suffered no setback. De Xiaofeng was in awe and remained somewhat ashamed. He blushed.

"I couldn't sleep when suddenly someone kicked in the door. Two individuals burst into the room. Fortunately, I had my blade close at hand. The tallest was Zhang Yujin, the Golden Spear, he continued to explain, pointing to the notch in the table. they had therefore not left the capital. They made us believe it to make us relax our vigilance and come back at nightfall. This Zhang Yujin is really treacherous!"

Xiulian listened to him, but blamed herself. She thought she had caused everything and deeply regretted it. Shortly after, she turned to Lady De. The latter, having regained breath, declared:



"Fortunately, my younger sister was there. On his own, how could he have overcome these brigands?"

"Don't worry," Xiulian said to comfort her, "I can assure you that these two scoundrels will never come back. And then I will stay with you for a while longer."

At this news, De Xiaofeng felt reassured. He went to the forecourt and asked his servants to keep watch, then returned to his apartments. Young Yu and his wife chatted for a long time before going back to bed. De Xiaofeng kept his weapon close to him, he couldn't sleep a night.

The next day, De Xiaofeng informed the yamen of the incident. The officials had a good relationship with him and they sent men to monitor his residence. During the day, the guards would remain seated in front of the main door, and in the evening, they would patrol the house. After a few days, nothing abnormal had happened. The De couple had recovered from their emotions, but Xiulian seemed impatient and in a bad mood. De Xiaofeng strongly advised her not to go out and she dared not contradict him. She still cared about mother and daughter Xie. She regularly sent servants to visit them and bring them money. She did nothing else with her days and spent her time observing her sabers or sighing.

Now she wanted only one thing: that Li Mubai quickly return to the capital and give her news of Meng Sizhao. She also hoped that he would find a solution for her and tell her what to do after she left the De's house. Sometimes, during discussions with Lady De, she would think about it all, paying no more attention to the words of her host. In the evening, rolled up in the blankets, by the light of the lamp, she felt infinite pain. She grieved over her own disastrous fate, now alone and helpless. She thought back to her parents who had passed away the same year. She did not know when she could transfer their remains to Julu, which were waiting, one in Yushu Township, the other in Xuanhua. She would then hate Meng Sizhao for his lack of compassion and resent Li Mubai for his changing attitude. These thoughts kept Xiulian from closing her eyes all night long, as her cheeks were steadily covered with tears.

A few days passed. Yang Jiantang came to bid farewell to De

Xiaofeng and young Yu. He was returning with his men to Yanqing. De Xiaofeng welcomed his departure, but was concerned that he had not heard from Li Mubai. Since his quarrel with Huang Jibei, he obviously expected to be the victim of some conspiracy.

It was getting colder and colder - the coal stoves had already been lit. After dinner, De Xiaofeng and his wife were having fun with their children when young Yu visited them in their apartment. Sitting by the stove, she chatted with Lady De. She was about to inform De Xiaofeng of her resolution to leave the capital when Shou'er's voice sounded outside:

"Lord Li is back!"

De Xiaofeng, in his astonishment, immediately replied through the window:

"Which Lord Li are you talking about?"

"Lord Li Mubai!" Shou'er exclaimed.

De Xiaofeng jumped up.

"Why is he only coming back now?" He asked, a smile on his face.

He came running to greet him. Xiulian, very happy with this news, was going to do the same, but seeing the happy face of Lady De, she felt embarrassed and preferred to sit down.

De Xiaofeng walked along the corridor and went to the forecourt reception hall. Li Mubai was seated, facing the lamp. As soon as he saw De Xiaofeng, he straightened up immediately and exclaimed:

"Big brother, how are you?"

De Xiaofeng walked over to grab his hand. While using a slight tone of reproach, he said to him:

"Brother, where did you go? So many events have taken place since you left!"

He then raised the lamp to see Li Mubai better. His face and hair

were covered with dust. He looked emaciated and looked defeated. The sides and sleeves of his long, padded jacket were worn and torn.

De Xiaofeng, surprised, questioned him:

"Did you just pass through the gates of the capital?"

"When I entered the city, night was already falling. I took my mount to the temple first, then hired a cart to come directly here, without having had time to wash my face. I have spent the last few days in sadness and anxiety. I heard that Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin were looking for me, but I really couldn't come back here!"

At the end of his patience, De Xiaofeng exclaimed:

"But where have you gone? Did you find Meng Sizhao, yes or no?"

Li Mubai raised his eyes to the window and glanced there as if to verify that no one was listening to them. De Xiaofeng motioned for Shou'er to leave them alone in the room. Li Mubai took a seat in front of him. He said sadly in a low voice:

"I have just returned from Gaoyang District. There, Meng Sizhao was seriously injured by Miao Zhenshan and his men. He did not survive."

De Xiaofeng was stunned. He wanted to interrupt, but Li Mubai continued his story.

The day Shi the Fat came to pick him up, they rode relentlessly to reach Gaoyang District as quickly as possible. Meng Sizhao had been moved to an inn to treat his injury and Shi's employee was taking care of him. Seeing Meng Sizhao so sad and distressed, Li Mubai said to him:

"Brother, you have been way too brash! We could have talked calmly about the problems you were having. What took you to recover the sword, to borrow a mount from the beile and thus leave Beijing to go alone to face Miao and his men?"

Meng Sizhao was watching Li Mubai with a smile, as if he wanted

to show him that he was all wrong. His dart wound was deep: he would have liked to speak, but did not have the strength anymore. There was no good doctor in Gaoyang District, they relied on ointment to cure his stab wound. But his condition became more and more worrying every day. Li Mubai, very anxious, instructed Shi the Fat to bring back a doctor from Baoding, but he could not find a competent one.

Upon his return, Shi informed Li Mubai of the recent passage of Miao Zhenshan and his men in Baoding. They had stayed there and sowed panic for several days before leaving for the capital. Li Mubai wanted to go immediately to Beijing to fight them, and thus avenge Meng Sizhao. But the latter, lying on his mat, kept moaning and had a high fever. His injury was not showing any improvement, and he sometimes even passed out in pain.

Li Mubai thought about renting a cart and transporting him to the capital to see a doctor. But Shi the Fat urged him not to:

"Lord Li, look! His injury has seriously worsened! All we can do is pray to Heaven and hope that he gets better! If you set out with him, you will never reach Beijing: I'm afraid the cart's bouncing around will quickly get the better of him!"

Li Mubai realized that he could not endure the trip in such a state. Finding himself without a remedy or a doctor, he could no longer sleep and looked after him day and night.

One evening, in his last bursts of life, Meng Sizhao seemed to come to his senses and spoke:

"My wound won't heal, don't bother looking for a doctor for me. Big brother Li, you came, that's good! I would like to talk to you... in order to die in peace!"

Meng Sizhao began to tell him his life story.

As a child, when he first ran away, Meng Sizhao wandered beyond the Great Wall and learned martial arts there. When he returned to his family, his father still showed him affection, but not as much as he did for his eldest son, Meng Sichang. This one was arrogant and

treacherous, with dishonest acts. He planned, on the death of old guard Meng, to seize all the family goods. He constantly oppressed his younger brother. Sizhao had thought of running away from home again, but his father had already arranged his marriage to Yu Xiulian. He had heard that the young woman was very beautiful and also excelled in martial arts. So he could only swallow his anger and support his brother in silence. After the wedding, he was planning to leave his home to try his luck elsewhere by opening a small business. Last spring, Zhang Wanqing, the local despot of Xuanhua, seized a married woman. Sizhao had heard of this story and was outraged. Armed with his saber, he had gone to the tyrant and cut off both his legs. He then abandoned Xuanhua, with no business or money, and wandered for several days. Although a follower of martial arts, he had not wanted to stoop to associating with people of Rivers and Lakes, let alone soak in stories of brigandage. So he had lived miserably.

Subsequently, he had met in Beijing a monk whom he had known in Kouwai. This lama knew what had happened in Xuanhua. He had advised and helped him.

"After you crippled Zhang Wanqing, his family notified the government authorities. Men have been sent all over the place to look for you. Zhang Wanqing's uncle, the eunuch Zhang, has high responsibilities in the Palace. He is very influential. Upon capture, you would be immediately executed. Find yourself a quiet place to be forgotten for a few years. You can then reappear without too much difficulty."

Meng Sizhao had therefore changed his name and the lama had recommended him to the young beile Tie. He knew the beile was a martial arts person. He thought he would treat Meng Sizhao with special consideration. He did not imagine that the beile would notice only the ragged clothes of young Meng, and place him as a servant in the stables of the residence. Meng Sizhao, brash and asocial by nature, had not flaunted his talents and resigned himself to accepting the tasks offered to him. He planned to wait a while at the beile's home, while Zhang Wanqing's affair settled down so that he could finally get back on the roads. If it was possible for him to acquire a small business, then he would go find Yu Xiulian in Julu

to marry her.

He hadn't expected to meet Li Mubai, who had discerned the hero he was behind his appearance of a simple stable hand. Meng Sizhao could only give him infinite gratitude. With the fame, art and temperament that Li Mubai held, Meng Sizhao especially admired him. When he fell ill, Sizhao rushed to take care of him.

Their friendship had grown deeper and deeper, thanks to this cohabitation for several days. Meng Sizhao had thought to reveal his real name to him and tell him about his past. But Li Mubai had told him about his vain admiration for Yu Xiulian. Meng Sizhao had been very sorry for him. Li Mubai first confronted young Yu so that he could marry her. He helped her father fend off his enemies and even took it upon himself to get him out of prison, then old guard Yu died and Li Mubai took care of the funeral. He is honest and upright. I know he behaved well and can't imagine that anything happened between him and her. But, during the long journey to Xuanhua, a sense of mutual admiration was born between them. Because of me, they could never be closer. Xiulian will never be able to express her gratitude to him, she must suffer greatly. Li Mubai, who has lost all hope of being by her side, abandoned his ambitions and, in despair, fell in love with Xie Cuixian. He went to prison and then fell ill.

Faced with this observation, Meng Sizhao felt ashamed and sad. He blamed himself: My marriage to Yu Xiulian has been arranged since I was a child, but I have never met her. I have offended a local bully and caused a disaster, I cannot see my family again. I am no more than a vulgar stable servant, who cannot even provide for his needs. How could I become her husband? On the other hand, Li Mubai is someone who stands out and excels in martial arts. His reputation in Beijing is well established and he has many friends. If Xiulian married him, he would in no way discredit her talent and beauty... How could I allow myself to hinder their future? After reading De Xiaofeng's letter, he learned of the arrival of the young Xiulian in the capital. His dismay and grief had been so blatant that Li Mubai had discovered his true identity. He had then rushed outside. Since Li Mubai knows who I am, he had thought, he will wait for Yu Xiulian to come and will want us to marry at all costs, even if it

breaks his heart. But how would I have the affront to introduce myself to her? Meng Sizhao had therefore borrowed a mount and stole the precious sword to escape Beijing. He had headed in the direction of Gaoyang. He had gone to meet Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin to fight them. He had thus shown his friendship and deep gratitude to Li Mubai, and also thought to help Xiulian achieve a brighter future.

In agony, he finally managed to confess what was on his mind to Li Mubai. After this story, he felt a sharp pain in his arm and passed out. He painfully came to himself, moaning. Serene in his heart of hearts, his eyes half-closed and his emaciated face showing a pale smile, he said to Li Mubai:

"Brother Li, a great hero must remain magnanimous and loyal. If he thinks a cause is right, he should devote himself to it and not be overwhelmed by his feelings, like a literate student. A few more words: Yu Xiulian and I have to get married, but there is no predestined affinity between us. If I escaped, I would never have the courage to marry her. Big brother, since you have a deep affection for her, as well as the support of friends like De Xiaofeng to act as a go-between, I have no problem with your deciding to unite with her. Xiulian will then be able to rely on you. As for me, continue to consider myself as Little Yu, a valet in the stables of the beile Tie's residence, and not as Meng Sizhao!"

Li Mubai listened to him tell his story and suffered as if a sword stabbed him. His tears, too long contained, began to flow. Li Mubai would have liked to discuss and explain to him that there had been nothing between him and young Yu. During the trip to Xuanhua, they only exchanged a few sentences. He wanted to tell him that even if he died, he could never marry Xiulian. It wasn't out of stubbornness, but he would never forgive himself that Meng Sizhao, with whom he had become so close, had been hurt because of him.

Li Mubai would have liked to take advantage of his friend's moment of lucidity to provide these clarifications that he kept buried deep inside him. But, knowing the impulsive nature of Meng Sizhao, he dreaded that he would lose his temper, thus shortening his last breath of life. He would have felt more remorse then for the rest of his life. He therefore preferred to be silent, overwhelmed. Gritting

his teeth and holding his friend's hand firmly, he let his tears flow. Shi the Fat was by their side and had heard Meng Sizhao's words. He was flabbergasted at Li Mubai's reaction but dared not say anything, which rarely happened to him.

Meng Sizhao closed his eyes and moaned. Shi grabbed Li Mubai's arm and motioned for him to follow him out of the room. He then declared gravely:

"I admire Meng Sizhao, that's a friend! He is frank and direct!"

Li Mubai was about to give him an explanation, but Shi anticipated his reaction and continued:

"I know what you're going to say. Lord Li, you also have your own principles, but you don't have to argue with him just yet, he doesn't have the strength. You can only hope that he recovers and doesn't die, you will sort out your affairs later!"

Li Mubai cried miserably and nodded, then returned to Meng Sizhao.

Shi looked at him from the back and said to himself: It is deplorable that a great hero, so young and so strong, torments himself like this. I thought he was infatuated with Xie Cuixian. I eliminated Fat Lu San and Lord Xu so that he could get his beloved back and that everything was finally settled. I never imagined that there was also this story with young Yu! I find myself with a brave man, seriously injured, who will soon breathe his last, and another suffering from love sickness. If Li Mubai continues like this, this case is going to break him... How to get him out of there? Shi sighed for a long time. He remained perplexed as to the behavior of his two friends towards this young Yu. He did not understand them. He was congratulating himself on being so stout. He would never be able to please women and would therefore not experience the torments of a love life. Standing, facing the freezing wind, he watched for a moment the comings and goings of the inn's customers and employees. They all seemed to be men much more established in existence than Li Mubai or Meng Sizhao. He thought: I, Fat Shi, am really in trouble! How did I manage to befriend only these two? Should I let them suffer from their illness without being able to do



anything about it? Immersed in his thoughts, he smiled.

Meng Sizhao then moaned and Shi hurried back to his side. He found Li Mubai and his young clerk at his bedside. They watched him helpless and anxious. Meng Sizhao sharply opened his eyes and groaned:

"Miao Zhenshan, you hurt your opponents with hidden weapons, what kind of brave man are you?"

He looked at Li Mubai and said tragically:

"Big brother Mubai!"

This one came closer.

"Yes brother?"

A few tears beaded at the corner of his eyes. Meng Sizhao couldn't say anything to him. He was seized with a convulsion. His mouth opened and his head sagged.

Li Mubai jumped up and grabbed his hand, which he felt stiffen and cool. He burst into tears. Shi didn't hold back his grief either. He finally took Li Mubai by the arm and said:

"Lord Li, let's leave the crying to Xie Cuixian and Yu Xiulian. What kind of brave men will we be if people see us cry? Meng Sizhao is dead, we have to buy a coffin and bury him. We will then return to Beijing without delay to face Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin!"

Shi the Fat called the innkeeper to take care of the coffin with his young clerk. Li Mubai was so sad that he felt like he had lost all his energy.

The clerk, accompanied by the carpenter, returned quickly with a willow coffin. Meng Sizhao's remains were put into a coffin. Li Mubai, in tears, carefully placed near the body of his friend the precious sword offered by the beile. He sobbed for a long time leaning against the coffin, then discussed with the innkeeper a possible place where he could bury him provisionally.

Li Mubai and Shi the Fat walked around all day, assisted by the innkeeper. They eventually found a plot south of the city. The place was called the Yellow Butte. It was a small hill of loess strewn with cultivated fields, which belonged to a relative of the innkeeper. After giving him some liang of silver, he allowed the body to be placed temporarily on his land.

The next day, Meng Sizhao was buried. An icy wind was blowing, sweeping away the fine yellow dust. Li Mubai had a small stele engraved. In front of the grave, he shed a few more tears. Beside him, Fat Shi urged him back to the inn.

"Lord Li," he told him, "Meng Sizhao is underground now. The dead do not come back to life. There is no point in being sad and going over this story with young Yu. Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin must have arrived in Beijing. If they can't find you, they'll spread the rumor of your escape. You must return to the capital as soon as possible to face them and thus avenge the death of Second Lord Meng!"

Li Mubai, dejected, remained seated without saying anything. He was calculating what attitude to have with Xiulian and had completely forgotten about this fight against Miao and Zhang. Shi the Fat, who had just spoken to him at length, got annoyed when he saw that he was ignoring him. He straightened up and rolled up his sleeves, revealing his strong arms.

"Lord Li," he cried, "but what are you going to do in the end? Second Lord Meng died because he fought for you against Miao Zhenshan. He was a brave man who commanded respect. What are you going to do now? If you plan to stay all your life looking at his grave, I'll leave you here and take no more care of you. I am going back to Beijing, I will face them alone!"

Furious, he told his young clerk to get their things ready. They left immediately for the capital. Li Mubai jumped up and pushed Shi the Fat into the wall.

"But you are completely ridiculous! I act as I see fit. Your opinion does not matter to me."

Shi, leaning against the wall, was blinking. He replied:

"So Lord Li, are you going to go back to Beijing or not?"

"Why wouldn't I go back?" he retorted. "I still have business to take care of there."

He stepped forward and tapped his shoulder.

"My old Shi, you are a friend! I assure you. Our friendship can only improve over time. But I have a request for you: don't interfere in my business and make trouble for me, okay?"

"Trouble? I have always done the best for my friends!" he laughed.

"I know that you are full of good intentions," Li Mubai pointed out, sighing lightly. "But in my case, we can't simplify things like you are used to!"

Li Mubai then begged the young boy to harness Meng Sizhao's mount to him and got his things ready.

Shi the Fat was dumbfounded for a moment and considered these words which he finally found full of common sense. Thanks to him, Li Mubai could have escaped from prison. He had eliminated Fat Lu San and Lord Xu so that his friend would marry Xie Cuixian and spend the rest of his days with her. In its place, everything would have been settled a long time ago, but to the knight errant, everything always seemed more complicated. The affair with young Yu posed a new dilemma: he suspected that Li Mubai would refuse to marry her and thus would not submit to Meng Sizhao's last wishes.

Shi the Fat was considering all this with a smile on his face, while observing Li Mubai. The latter, who was ready, said to him:

"I'm going back to Beijing right away. As soon as I have settled my affairs in the capital, I will return home to Nangong District. Shi, if you stay here, wait for me, I'll come back this way and we can meet again."

"I don't know yet what I'm going to do," he replied. "We will meet

again one day!"

"For sure! In any case, within a month, I will be heading south. If you need help afterwards, you know where to find me!"

"Okay," agreed Shi. "I will be sure to come and get you when needed, Lord Li. Don't worry about the room bill, he added, we will stay a few more days and I will settle everything then."

Li Mubai well knew that Shi was different from him and Meng Sizhao. He had ridden for many years in Rivers and Lakes, amassing quite a bit of money. So he nodded and thanked him.

The young boy and the innkeeper had just finished harnessing the black horse. Li Mubai, his sword in his belt, pulled the mount by the bridle and left the inn. Shi and the clerk accompanied him to the entrance. He climbed into the saddle and then greeted them with a fist in his other hand. Full of gratitude, he said:

"See you soon!"

"See you soon, Lord Li," Shi exclaimed. "I hope your affairs will be resolved as you wish!"

Li Mubai waved his whip. Braving the freezing north wind, the steed lifted the dust off the old road. He rode in one go back to the capital.

After Li Mubai left, Shi the Fat, the Serpent who climbed the Mountain, couldn't help but smile. He told the young boy:

"Disciple, prepare our things, we are leaving too!"

## Chapter 27

*The dagger pierces, the blood spills,*

*In the freezing night, the drama surprises them;*

*Hearts wither and tears run out,*

*At the gates of the capital, he waits for the silhouette to diminish.*

Li Mubai therefore traveled day and night to Beijing, entering it one evening at dusk. He left his mount and his belongings at the Faming Temple and proceeded to De Xiaofeng's residence without delay. In the reception hall, he informed him of Meng Sizhao's death. Dejected, he recounted the events in a low voice, fearing that the young Xiulian would hear him. De Xiaofeng kept sighing.

"This Meng Sizhao was really too proud," he said. What was he hoping for by rushing to Gaoyang, meeting Miao Zhenshan and his men, facing them alone? To die so tragically and abandon young Yu in this way is heartbreaking. What are we going to do now?"

He shook his head softly with heavy sighs, then, with a burst of enthusiasm, began to smile.

"Mubai, I haven't told you yet. As they say, "eye for an eye"! Guess a little! After arriving in Beijing, Miao Zhenshan was killed by young Yu. We can say that she avenged her fiancé's death in this way!"

Li Mubai was stunned. De Xiaofeng explained to him that after his departure, Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin had arrived in the capital. To begin with, they had faced Qiu Guangchao and Yang Jiantang. Miao had used hidden darts to injure the young Marquis, who still had not recovered from his injury. Subsequently, Miao Zhenshan began to dictate his law. De Xiaofeng had also learned that Cuixian, of the House of Sumptuous Treasures, had been the latter's wife, but that she had fled him. Miao had found her in Beijing. Mother and daughter were in dire straits. Lady Xie had come to ask for help at the residence and the matter had reached young Yu's ears. She had gone to rescue the two women, injuring

Miao Zhenshan's henchmen in the process. The next day, Xiulian had gone to meet him. By cunning, she had lured him to the outskirts of the city and slashed him with her sabers. Zhang Yujin had given up on filing a complaint but had come here to agree to a duel with young Yu. Le beile Tie had opposed this fight. Zhang Yujin and his men were driven out of the capital by decision of the yamen. They had not resigned themselves, however, and had burst into the residence at night to assassinate them. Young Yu had put them to flight.

Most enthusiastic, De Xiaofeng explained everything in detail to Li Mubai who could not believe his ears. Yu Xiulian killed Miao Zhenshan and managed to scoot Zhang Yujin off. She must have made enormous progress, he thought. Now that her fiancé is deceased, her fate is to be pitied! Li Mubai was seized with a sudden admiration and began to feel compassion for her. I never imagined that Xie Xianniang was Miao Zhenshan's wife, he told himself as well. No wonder she doesn't talk about her past and claims all the time that Jianghu's men are just bullies. She has always been kind to me. But from the day I beat the Fat Lu San, she was distant. At the time, I did not understand this sudden change. I realize better why she was so afraid of the Jianghu's men. She who had fled Miao Zhenshan because he was mistreating her, she probably feared that I was like him. Lost in thought, Li Mubai frowned. De Xiaofeng was smoking his water pipe.

He ended up asking Li Mubai if he had eaten.

"I've been riding all day, I haven't eaten anything today. I didn't even wash my face, could you get me some water to rinse my face?"

De Xiaofeng instructed Shou'er to take care of it and asked for a snack in the kitchen. Shou'er quickly returned with the water. After cooling off, Li Mubai looked better, but he continued to sigh as before. De Xiaofeng was still smoking, deep in thought.

Soon after, a cook brought two dishes of cold meat and two plates of fried dumplings, as well as a pitcher of alcohol. De Xiaofeng exclaimed:

"Brother, eat and drink as much as you want. It's still early and

you're in no rush to get home. Let's take the time to chat and take stock of the situation."

Li Mubai looked for a way to dodge a possible conversation about young Yu. He took a seat, took a sip of alcohol, then said:

"I have already made a resolution. Tomorrow, after bidding farewell to Second Lord Tie and my uncle, I will return home to Nangong!"

"You are leaving!" exclaimed De Xiaofeng. "But when do you expect to come back to the capital?"

"I have been in Beijing for more than six months, and I have found nothing to do here. I made friends, especially you, big brother, who looked after me and helped me all this time. I will be eternally grateful to you. After my return home, if nothing prevents me, I will come back to see you often!"

"Brother," replied De Xiaofeng coldly, "you don't have to talk like that. Between us, there is no gratitude or favors to return! When I befriend someone it's for life and my dedication is absolute! All the more so with you, whom I defended as if you were someone from my own family!"

De Xiaofeng was staring at Li Mubai who was sighing. Head down, his tears flowed little by little.

"If I tell you that," De Xiaofeng continued, "it is not at all for you to pay me back, but for you to understand the trouble I am giving myself for you. Yu Xiulian... "

De Xiaofeng suddenly realized that he was speaking too loudly. So he lowered his tone:

"I don't know this young woman. If I invited her to Beijing, that's why I met you. But you only continuously avoided her. You let her stay with me and you seem indifferent to the fact that she almost caused me problems with the law. What will become of her? Do you think she will stay with me forever? It is unsuitable! Where is she going to go? Her parents are dead, her fiancé had gone who knows where and ultimately lost his life. She does not get along with her

in-laws, and no longer has a single relative. This young woman knows how to use her sabers and is not afraid of anything, but she still cannot spend her life wandering in Jianghu!"

Li Mubai knew that De Xiaofeng was right, and each of his sentences touched him straight to the heart. However, he was unable to find a solution to Xiulian's precarious situation.

De Xiaofeng was annoyed to see him sigh without saying anything. You are a great hero, he thought, but you cannot come up with frank words and settle this matter definitively, in order to relieve a friend. He then said in a serious tone:

"Brother, Miao Zhenshan is dead, Zhang Yujin was kicked out of the capital. There is currently no one who can oppose you, so you can leave with peace of mind. Frankly speaking, young Yu Xiulian has admired you for a long time. She has a great moral quality and she is very talented in martial arts. Remember: this summer you told me you couldn't marry her because she was already promised to someone else. You were totally desperate by this situation. Since then, melancholy and sadness overwhelm you. Now we can fix it.

"Meng Sizhao is no more, Yu Xiulian was his fiancée and they had never met. She will remarry chaste. You could unite with her and help her bring back the bodies of her parents. No matter whether you settle in your native provinces or in the capital, young Yu will have support, and you, you will see all your wishes fulfilled. A man should always act by putting himself in other people's shoes, he shouldn't just do what he wants and create problems where there shouldn't be. All you have to do is approve my words, little brother! We will then go talk to Yu Xiulian. From the wedding to your future accommodation, your big brother will take care of everything for you!"

All smiles, De Xiaofeng observed his friend. I hope you will have some regard for everything I just told you, he thought. But Li Mubai, although touched, shook his head.

"It's impossible!" he exclaimed. "If I had not known Meng Sizhao and if he had not tragically died because of me, I might have seen the future like this... "



He couldn't hold back his tears.

"Meng Sizhao believed that there were feelings between her and me, which is why he abruptly left Beijing and devoted himself to me until his death. If I marry Yu Xiulian when he has only just been buried, I will be laughed at by everyone. And then, I still feel too sad!"

"You are really stubborn!" exclaimed De Xiaofeng. "So how do you see Xiulian's future? You had a good relationship with her father and you come from a neighboring district to his. You are from the same region, you must find a solution to the situation of this young and unhappy orphan."

"Of course," cried Li Mubai. "I will do my best to help her. I know that old guard Yu's disciples still reside at his property in Julu. I can bring them over to accompany Xiulian to her home or to Xuanhua."

Li Mubai seemed satisfied with his response. Sun Zhengli, the Eagle of the Five Talons, or his companions would be quite able to take care of their young mistress. She was still a national of Julu district, even though she had no relatives or friends left! De Xiaofeng just smiled coldly and thought that Li Mubai had still found a way to shirk his responsibilities.

"From now on," he said, "I won't worry about anything. Only, the death of Meng Sizhao must not be concealed from young Yu. I will go and find her. You are going to tell her yourself."

De Xiaofeng straightened up. He was about to go to the private apartments, when Li Mubai, panicked, put down his glass. He who did not want to be in front of Xiulian, hastened to hold him back:

"Big brother, why tell her straight away about this sad event and make her burst into tears? I will not leave until tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, until then, I will take the time to see her and explain everything to her!"

De Xiaofeng ached to hear him speak like that. With a pale face and sorrowful eyes, he exclaimed, stamping his foot:

"Little brother! Really, you give me a lot of worries! We have been friends for almost a year. I'll tell you: the problems with the Feng brothers, with Huang Jibei or Miao Zhenshan did not worry me as much as your story with young Yu. It really makes me worry crazy! It was with great difficulty that you found Meng Sizhao and it is not your fault that he is unfortunately dead!"

Desperate, he sat down again. Li Mubai knew he spoke with dedication. If he promised him to marry young Yu, De Xiaofeng would no doubt be overjoyed, but he said nothing. Did he even understand what torments he was experiencing? Li Mubai served him a glass of alcohol. The two men continued to argue. De Xiaofeng found other pretexts to launch into big speeches. Ultimately, he remained of the opinion that Li Mubai should marry the young Yu because they would both be fulfilled. He might even free up a room for the young couple at his home. He could then lend him money to open an escort agency or help him pursue a career in administration. Li Mubai just listened to him, unresponsive. De Xiaofeng was a sincere and warm friend, but he couldn't be a real confidant. Li Mubai tried to tell him as little as possible.

After the meal, Li Mubai was slightly tipsy. He took leave of his friend, promising him to come back the next day. De Xiaofeng wanted to prepare a cart for him, but Li Mubai refused.

"No need!" he exclaimed. "It is not late, I will go home quietly on foot!"

De Xiaofeng begged Shou'er to accompany him to the entrance. Li Mubai felt his heavy footsteps. Deeply distressed, he walked out to the west corner of the alley. The many cups of alcohol made his head spin and stomach ache.

The second watch sounded. The sky was covered with black clouds, plunging the den into darkness. Li Mubai could not tell if it was a fine rain or sleet falling on his face. The wind was not blowing very strongly. At this hour, passers-by and carts coming and going on the avenue were numerous. Li Mubai eventually rented a cart to drive to the southern city.

The driver waved his whip while smoking his pipe.

"It's really cold," he said. "Now it starts to snow!"

Li Mubai looked outside. In the depths of the night, the paper lantern hanging from the cart emitted a faint light. Small flakes flew and fell on the path. Li Mubai realized that he had been away from home for over six months. His uncle had sent him two letters, to which he had not replied. He really thought he had to go home.

The vehicle exited the inner city and entered the southern city. The snow was falling more and more. Li Mubai suddenly remembered a summer evening. After leaving his friend De Xiaofeng, it started to rain. He had finally gone to the House of Sumptuous Treasures to see Xianniang. That night, the rain had poured down and the young woman had held him near her. Thinking back to that time, he thought he had committed a serious misconduct. But she had treated him with so much consideration! That evening he had discovered a dagger hidden in her pillow. He thought to himself that Xianniang certainly had a tragic story. Whenever he had tried to ask her about her past, she had never answered him. He now knew that she had fled Miao Zhenshan, who had her father beaten to death. He had found her in Beijing and would have charged her dearly if Yu Xiulian had not protected her. Li Mubai decided to visit Xianniang before he left Beijing. Even if she does recover, I'm afraid I'll never see her again, he thought. Whatever happens, I have to put an end to the feelings I have left towards her. He then told himself that the love between women and men really was most painful and most complicated.

Li Mubai stopped the cart when it reached the Hufang Bridge. He faced the snow and walked through the mud. He walked through the darkness of the alley of Liuli's pink houses and found the entrance where Xianniang and her mother resided. The doors of the damaged door were closed. Li Mubai drummed on it. Quickly, a man's voice rose from inside:

"Who are you looking for?"

"My name is Li and I come to see mother and daughter Xie."

The man who opened was none other than Yu Er. He was very respectful. Facing Li Mubai's imposing stature, he asked:

"Are you Lord Li who lives in Prime Minister's Lane?"

Li Mubai nodded.

"I returned to the capital in the evening. I heard that Xianniang was brutalized and I come to visit her."

"Indeed! The last few times have been trying for her. Fortunately, young Yu stood up to Miao Zhenshan and he never dared to return. But Xianniang's illness is only getting worse!"

While speaking, Yu Er led Li Mubai to their room and called out:

"Aunt Xie! Aunt Xie! Lord Li Mubai is here!"

Inside, Lady Xie's voice was heard, immediately followed by a moan of pain. Light appeared in the room and she opened the door. At the sight of Li Mubai, she exclaimed as if welcoming a loved one:

"My little lord Li, see our distress! Get back to Xianniang quickly. Tonight may be your last meeting!" Lady Xie's manner surprised Li Mubai; however, he was saddened by this announcement. He walked in and smelled a strong smell in the room. Near the bed, a faint glow emanated from the oil lamp. The room was cold, there was no stove. Xianniang was lying on the kang. She lifted the edge of the blanket slightly, revealing her pale face and disheveled hair.

"Lord Li, you are just in time! I only have one breath of life left, and it will be to see you!"

Lady Xie started to cry. She was going to tell him about Miao Zhenshan's arrival and the unexpected intervention of young Yu, but Li Mubai waved his hand.

"No need, I know what happened. The Fifth Lord De has already explained everything to me. Tell me instead, how is Xianniang doing? Did you bring in a doctor?"

"Where would we get the money?" lamented Lady Xie. "Lord Li, we

have spent what you have given us. We're both going to starve soon, and now even Aunt Jin wants us out of here!"

Li Mubai frowned and thought he had to help them. Xianniang suddenly moaned.

"Lord Li, please don't ask us any more questions. Anyway, I have no hope of a cure. My death is near. My mother is not too old, she will still be able to offer her services to a wealthy family."

At these words, Lady Xie began to sob even more.

Li Mubai had decided to be firm in coming to see them, but seeing the situation, his heart softened. He consoled Xianniang:

"Why do you say that! You are only twenty years old. In a few days, you will be much better, then you will have time to think about your future. Miao Zhenshan is dead, now no one can ruin your life!"

Xianniang was crying. She looked up to look at Li Mubai in the dim light of the lamp. She couldn't tell if she was feeling regret or sadness. In a low sob she said:

"Lord Li, I made the wrong choice!"

Li Mubai realized that she was regretting her past decisions. Believing him as bad as Miao Zhenshan, she preferred to marry Lord Xu and refused his proposal. He thought back to the night he had come to find her at the residence in the Alley of the Field of Maneuver to save her. At the time, she hadn't grasped his good intentions and had spoken to him coldly. Now he could only feel sorry for the fate of poor Xianniang. How not to be reluctant to part with her? All the stories I have had in my life have only destroyed me! he thought. He pulled himself together and said sincerely to Xianniang:

"I understand what you just said. But that's the way it is and regrets are useless. I arrived in Beijing less than a year ago. I have lived many experiences and gone through many trials that I could not have imagined. I also made several mistakes that I will never do again!"

Xianniang listened to him. She felt her heart harden and her tears stopped falling. Li Mubai continued:

"I am more pitiful than you two, I am broken by unbearable torments. I expect to leave Beijing in a day or two. I may not return to the capital. Our paths have crossed, this evening will undoubtedly be our last meeting. This is how you made your choice, I no longer have the strength to save you or to find a solution for you. Tomorrow afternoon, come to the temple, I will give you about twenty liang. You must recover, you will find after the means to earn your living!"

Li Mubai was about to leave. Realizing that he was leaving the capital, Lady Xie panicked, but felt reassured when he said to offer them money. She wanted to thank him, but Xianniang, annoyed, lifted her head to address Li Mubai.

"Lord Li, therefore follow your path, run therefore towards your bright future! In our situation, we no longer need the money, save it for your travel expenses. Today will be our last interview. We cannot say that we have known each other in vain... "

Xianniang was extremely sad. It was as if a dagger pierced Li Mubai's heart. He also felt anger and wanted to challenge. But he thought: How can I get myself into more trouble? He then replied:

"Xianniang, if you still think I'm not a man, I won't argue with you. Later, you will think about it! I am leaving!"

He turned on his heel and left. The icy wind pierced him to the bone and the snow lashed his face. The sky was darkening.

Yu Er walked Li Mubai back to the entrance and opened the door for him.

"Lord Li, are you going home?" He asked.

Li Mubai made a vague sound, while stomping on the snow and mud with his heavy footsteps. Lady Xie then began to cry, like the howl of a ghost, and she burst into tears.

"My child! How could you do this to me!"

Li Mubai was dumbfounded. With Yu Er, he rushed back to the bedroom. On the covers of the kang, they saw blood. Xianniang squeezed her chest with her hands. She was shaking all over but no longer moaning. A dagger was placed near the pillow. Lady Xie was leaning over her daughter's body and crying tragically. Li Mubai pushed her aside and held up the lamp. He only saw a terrifying pool of blood that kept spilling out.

Awakened by the noises, Aunt Jin, the owner, jumped out of her blankets. Draped in a leather cape, she ran to see what was happening. Pointing to Lady Xie, she exclaimed:

"It's as if you want my loss! You stay with me for free and behave like this! The room is completely soiled!"

She then wanted to grab hold of Lady Xie as if to prevent her from leaving. Li Mubai suddenly stopped her in her tracks and stared at her:

"Stop a little! Whatever happens, I, Li Mubai, will compensate you for everything. Xianniang just stabbed her chest, the most important thing right now is to save her. Don't come here to bother us!"

Aunt Jin knew who this man was. He had beaten Fat Lu San and all the ruffians in the capital feared him. She naturally did not dare to reply.

After berating Aunt Jin, Li Mubai returned to Xianniang whose body was now inert. He panicked. He hastened to take her arm, which he found cold and limp. Li Mubai's tears began to spring. Beside him, Lady Xie kept calling for her daughter. Without an answer, she shined the lamp on her face; in front of her tragic impassibility, she understood that she had just died. She lowered the lamp with a trembling hand. She leaned over Xianniang's body and sobbed bitterly.

Aunt Jin stepped forward to take a look. Her expression changed and she said:

"She is dead. Will you get a coffin from the carpenter or notify the authorities?"

"She killed herself with that dagger," Li Mubai replied, wiping away his tears, "no one forced her to do so. Why should we warn the authorities, who could we file a complaint against?"

Yu Er was also affected by the deplorable death of Xianniang. He tried to comfort Lady Xie, then said:

"It's late and it's snowing a lot. We will not find a coffin or mortuary clothes for the moment. Besides, we have no money! Lord Li, the two of you have been close. After this tragic death, you could still have a little gesture for her and pay for her funeral!"

"Of course! I never imagined that she could die like this! Tomorrow morning," he sighed, addressing Lady Xie, "come and see me at the temple, I will have the money ready for you."

Lady Xie, who was crying desperately as she covered her face with her hands, nodded.

Li Mubai was going to leave them. He couldn't stand the atmosphere of the room, let alone the sight of Xianniang stained with blood. He suddenly realized that the dagger was still on the kang. He was afraid that Lady Xie, finding herself alone later, would turn the blade against herself. So he took it.

"I am leaving!" He concludes, not stopping sighing.

Aunt Jin harassed him:

"Lord Li, you absolutely have to come back tomorrow. Either way, it's up to you to take care of this matter. They might be my relatives, but I've already spent a lot of money and energy on them, I've done enough now. I can't fix this story!"

"Do not worry!" he declared imposingly. "It doesn't matter whether I come or not, but I'll take care of the funeral. I will shoulder all the responsibilities including the last act of Xianniang. Since you are of their family, stop being in the middle and bothering them, I will not tolerate it!"

Li Mubai left the room, followed by Yu Er who opened the front door for him. Li Mubai advised him to watch over Lady Xie: another



suicide should be avoided. Yu Er nodded several times and Li Mubai left.

The wind was freezing, the snow was falling in large flakes. The sky, like a leaden screed, gave off a gloomy atmosphere. Li Mubai's heart was still colder than the wind, but his eyes seemed ablaze. Stomping on the snow, he got out of the alley as best he could. Having lost all sense of direction, he paused when he reached the avenue. He saw no passerby or cart. He reached out his cold hand to wipe his eyes. He realized that his tears had frozen on his eyelashes. He found his direction and walked along the avenue west. The wind and the snow redoubled in intensity. He did not meet anyone, only a dog chased him barking. He found his steps heavier and heavier and it was with great difficulty that he regained the entrance to the Faming Temple from the Prime Minister's Lane.

The dog, who continued to follow him, annoyed Li Mubai. He thought to pull out the dagger to kill it. But when he grabbed the bloody blade, he was pierced with pain. He sighed. I went back to Xianniang in spite of myself. On a misunderstanding, she killed herself! I suspected it would end badly. Why did I go to brothels pretending to be a client? Why did I have to go talk about love with her? In the end, Lord Xu was murdered and Xianniang was abandoned. She had to take care of herself to regain her health, I no longer had to take care of her and everything would be back to normal. What need did I have to introduce myself to her again? What kind of man am I going to become? He kept blaming himself and hated who he was.

Li Mubai knocked on the temple door. Like a retribution, snowflakes were piling up on him. The dog sniffed at him as if sensing a peculiar smell, refusing to leave him alone. The barking of the animal, mingled with the drumming of the door, resounded in the snowy night.

After a while, a monk exclaimed from inside the monastery:

"Who is it?"

"It's me, Li Mubai!" He replied as the monk opened the door.

Li Mubai thanked him. While closing behind him, the monk said to him:

"We bought some fodder to feed your mount, Lord Li."

"Thank you. I think I will be back soon! On the day of my departure, I will not forget to express my gratitude to you!"

The monk made a few polite sentences and let him return to his room. The black horse was tied under the corridor, unable to kick or jump. He was neighing, as if calling his mate Meng Sizhao.

Li Mubai came in and turned on the lamp. He sat down, silent. Tears were still streaming down his cheeks. It was particularly cold in the room. He closed the door and extinguished the lamp before settling on the kang and bundling up in the blanket. Through the window the horse continued to neigh and the dog to bark in the distance. Li Mubai could not find sleep. He suddenly thought: After I left, wouldn't De Xiaofeng have announced Meng Sizhao's death to young Yu? Xiulian could find and harass me in order to find out the truth. What could I say to her? Basically, I have nothing to hide or blame myself for. But how could he explain to her the reason for his sudden departure and the doubt he had about them? How do I repeat to her the words he said to me before he died? If a misunderstanding arose, it would be much worse than one of those crimes that Heaven cannot forgive! These reflections kept him from sleeping all night.

The next day, when he got up, Li Mubai opened his bedroom door. The snowfall was heavy, it was as if the city had donned a silvery white coat. Less dense than the day before, the flakes were still falling. Concerned about his promise to Lady Xie, Li Mubai went to a bank, without even taking the time to wash his face. Armed with the booklet De Xiaofeng had lent him, he withdrew about fifty liang of silver. He then returned to the temple. The snow had stopped. A monk was sweeping the yard to remove snow. As soon as he saw Li Mubai, he exclaimed:

"An old lady is looking for you!"

Li Mubai quickly crossed the courtyard and found Lady Xie under

the hallway leaning against a table, her hands cradled in her sleeves, chilled with cold. His eyes were red and swollen from crying. Her face, pale and thin, was all wrinkled, which made her ugly and pitiful at the same time.

"There you are," Li Mubai exclaimed, "I went to get your money! Here are fifty liang, take them and put them to good use. Spend no more than twenty liang on the funeral. Carefully guard the rest and live modestly. In my opinion, the best is if you find a job as a maid, then no one will take pity on you anymore!"

Lady Xie reached out to retrieve the heavy letter which she hugged against her chest, still crying. Before coming to see Li Mubai, Aunt Jin had instigated her to blackmail him. Lady Xie thought she would insist on asking for his help to find a solution for the rest of her life. But, receiving the envelope that she could barely support, she could not help but feel full of gratitude and sobbed even more. It was as if she had regained some hope, she was even about to kneel in the snow to bow down to the ground in front of him. Li Mubai couldn't bear to see her like that. He kept waving his hand:

"Hurry back home! And above all, use the money wisely!"

Dame Xie nodded several times. Squeezing the package, she left the place.

Li Mubai returned to the room. His morale was at its lowest, he felt sad and downcast. He decided to go to the public baths. He thought he could rest there and regain his vitality a little. But his mind was as confused as tangled hemp and he couldn't relax. Through the glass windows of the establishment, the rays of the sun shone in the room. It was fine and clear again. Li Mubai told himself that he had nothing more to do in Beijing and made up his mind to leave today. The weather is nice and the snow will melt, he thought, the road will still be passable. I'll be back home in less than ten days. I've been in the capital for several months. I made a reputation there and made several friends. It is not without some regrets that I am going to leave. But I only have to think back to all the painful moments I have had here, to tell myself that the best is still to leave as soon as possible. His decision made, he got out of the baths and hired a cart to go to the beile Tie.

Li Mubai had not seen him since he had left the capital with Shi the Fat several weeks before. He felt slightly ashamed to be in front of him again. He explained to him the reasons for his hasty departure and the tragic circumstances of Meng Sizhao's death. The beile listened to him summarily, then said:

"De Xiaofeng just came to see me, he left recently. He already told me everything."

Li Mubai was greatly astonished to learn that De Xiaofeng had just visited him and wondered what they had said to each other. He carefully observed the expression of the beile who seemed unhappy. He spoke to him in a very solemn way:

"Mubai, you are a young man with a lot of potential! You are versed in both letters and martial arts and you have great moral qualities. Trust me! Don't go wandering around Jianghu. Join the ranks and distinguish yourself with military feats! No one can match you. You still have one weakness. Forgive me for being outspoken, but you give too much consideration to your romantic adventures!"

The beile had just put his finger bluntly on what was hurting Li Mubai. He felt extremely confused, but also sad. He had tears in his eyes. Young Beile Tie repeats what he has been told. If he could put himself in my shoes, he would know that I couldn't do otherwise. Another young man, sentimental and sincere, finding himself in my situation, would have the same difficulties and could not get out of it!

As he was about to answer, the beile continued:

"I think the story with Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin is settled. By inviting them, Huang Jibei wanted at most, like Feng Mao the Golden Sabers, to compete with you. It doesn't matter to me. On the other hand, I would never have imagined that these two men were such terrible brigands! They concealed weapons to injure Qiu Guangchao, then brutalized a mother and her daughter. They have never ceased to be talked about. And besides, no one knew where you had gone! Young Yu, who lives with De Xiaofeng, had revenge against Zhang Yujin, and the affair almost grew too much!

"Outside the city, she defeated Miao Zhenshan who died of it the same day. Zhang Yujin and his gang did not dare to press charges, but they set him up for a duel, alarming the whole yamen. Huang Jibei found his guests somewhat cumbersome and De Xiaofeng was terribly concerned. It was all getting way too extravagant, so I told the yamen authorities about it. I suggested that they expel Zhang Yujin and his men from the capital. I heard that Huang Jibei had fallen ill and never left his home. Now that you're back, you don't have to worry - no one will get you in trouble.

"De Xiaofeng also told me about the death of Little Yu in Gaoyang. You don't have to be sad. We couldn't have stopped him from leaving. He was determined to run away. He was finally hit by a weapon that Miao Zhenshan had concealed, what can we do about it? Of course, he was young and to die like that is really sad! Now, only the case of young Yu remains to be resolved. Little Yu is dead, she has no one to rely on anymore. She no longer has a close relative and cannot return to her in-laws. That she resides among the De also has several drawbacks. The best would still be to follow the idea of De Xiaofeng who proposes to act as a matchmaker for your marriage."

Li Mubai nodded in disapproval. The beile continued his momentum:

"I think that this act cannot be coerced and at the time, I tried for a long time to convince Xiaofeng of it. Now tell me, I'm waiting for a clear answer from you: in the end, do you like, yes or no, this young Yu?"

The beile stared at Li Mubai, whose face turned from red to purple. He never imagined that the beile would one day ask him such a question. To be honest, if he hadn't loved Yu Xiulian, how could he have been so bruised with despair? But it had happened to him many adventures thereafter. The beile wanted a straight answer. He felt a deep pain, but dared not be ambiguous. After a brief hesitation, Li Mubai said with a grave and affirming demeanor:

"I don't like her!"

While he would have liked to justify himself, the beile nodded and

continued:

"Good, so that's settled! The good man must be frank. If so, and you don't like young Yu, it's ancient history, let's not talk about it anymore! And now, what are your plans?"

Decided, Li Mubai replied:

"I am leaving Beijing, today or tomorrow, to return home. I will stay there for a few months and then I will see what I will do. Maybe I'll come back to the capital or go to Jiangnan."

"You've been in Beijing for some time now, it's good that you're going back to see your family. Do you have enough money for your travel expenses?"

Li Mubai nodded.

"Good," concluded the beile. "We will see each other again one day! If I need you, I'll send someone to find you."

"Second lord, you treated me with so much kindness, I will be eternally grateful to you!"

Li Mubai felt a lot of pain. The beile also wore a sad expression, a testament to his affection. The two men exchanged a few more words then Li Mubai took his leave.

He got into a cart to go to De Xiaofeng's house. His friend still looked concerned. Li Mubai told him that he wanted to leave the capital. De Xiaofeng sighed but made no remark. Li Mubai explained to him that he had used money from the account to assist Lady Xie and her daughter, but would pay it back. De Xiaofeng refused.

"If you give me this money back, it's because you've decided not to see me anymore! I am not very rich, but this small sum will not hurt me. Keep the booklet. If you don't deign to use it, you just have to put it aside, it doesn't matter. What worries me is whether you have any feelings left for Yu Xiulian. The man of value must not be satisfied with fame, he must also marry and make a career. You told me yourself that only Yu Xiulian was worthy to be your wife. At the

moment, she is not married. Meng Sizhao is no longer of this world, I could advance several arguments and serve as a go-between for your union. I would undoubtedly succeed in... "

Li Mubai didn't let him finish his sentence. Looking sad, he kept shaking his head.

"I don't want to discuss this matter with young Yu any more. I have already answered Second Lord Tie when I went to see him!"

De Xiaofeng was surprised and said with a smirk:

"Since this is so, your friends are not going to force you. So you are getting ready to leave, let me accompany you!"

"Big brother, it is not worth it. I am setting off today."

"Which gate will you leave the city by?"

"Through the Zhangyi gate. I, Li Mubai, he continued with emotion, have made many friends in this life, but I only feel gratitude and esteem for one: it is you, big brother. If I don't die, I hope I can thank you for your deep affection!"

Li Mubai was very moved. He began to cry. De Xiaofeng tried to comfort him:

"Brother, why are you talking like this? I have always remained sincere and loyal to my friends and I am especially so with you! You are going away for a while, but there are many days that we still have to spend together. I hope that you will manage to moderate your temper and that you will no longer have to worry about your business. If you encounter any difficulties, come and get me, I will do anything to help you!"

Li Mubai nodded. De Xiaofeng knew he hadn't eaten and told his cooks to prepare meals. The two men chatted for a while while sipping alcohol.

Li Mubai, in a hurry to leave, drank only a few cups in his company, then took his leave. As per convenience, he should have gone to the private apartments to bid farewell to his mother and

wife, but Li Mubai was afraid to meet Xiulian.

"I'm not going in to say hello to your old mother and your dear wife."

"I will pass on your respects to them!"

Li Mubai straightened up. De Xiaofeng escorted him to the door of the interior apartments. The two men then said their farewells.

Li Mubai rented a cart and rode back to the southern city. When the cart passed the alleyway of Liuli's pink houses, he thought about attending Xianniang's funeral ceremony but changed his mind. It's all over now, he said to himself, what's the use of rekindling the wounds? He went straight to Half South alley to see his uncle Qi Dianchen. He explained to him that he found no interest in residing longer in Beijing and that he had decided to return home.

Li Mubai had not been in the capital for six months after standing out for his kung fu. He had thus met rich personalities such as the beile Tie or the young Marquis Qiu. His uncle thought he could no longer live in peace because of his actions. He therefore approved of this decision.

"If you want to go home, that's also good! If I have a chance for you, I'll let you know!"

He wrote two letters that Li Mubai would take with him and offered him about twenty liang of silver for his travel expenses. His aunt then gave him many recommendations, then told him to pass on their greetings to such and such family and other trifles. Li Mubai kept nodding.

Laisheng walked him to the entrance and asked him:

"Lord Li, when are you leaving? Let me know, let me come and help you pack your bags!"

Li Mubai accepted without thinking and returned to Faming Temple. His business was finally settled, he felt relieved. He had little baggage to collect. Everything was quickly tied up and his mount was ready. He went to find the monks to bid them farewell.



He gave them about ten liang of silver, the monks seemed delighted. They greeted him with folded hands and wished him a safe journey.

Li Mubai left the temple holding his horse by the bridle. He got out of the Prime Minister's Alley and only got in the saddle once on the avenue. He waved his whip and headed for the Zhangyi Gate. Before crossing it, he saw a vehicle near the door. De Xiaofeng got out, dressed in civilian clothes and wearing a small toque. He exclaimed all smiles:

"Mubai, my brother. You told me you were leaving and here you are on your way! I've been waiting for you for a long time to accompany you!"

Li Mubai was about to dismount but De Xiaofeng stopped him:

"Stay in the saddle! I'm getting back in the cart. I'll keep you company to the suburbs, then I'll go home!"

De Xiaofeng stepped over the stretcher and Fuzi set off. Li Mubai's mount walked alongside the vehicle. The two men began to chat. De Xiaofeng looked cheerful and delighted but said:

"Brother, after your departure, I will find myself quite alone."

Li Mubai reluctantly parted ways with his friend, who was so friendly and enthusiastic with him. He couldn't hold back tears of gratitude.

The weather had cleared that day, but the snow had not completely melted. Dark clouds were appearing in the distance, however. The north wind was blowing, blowing snowflakes from the branches onto faces. De Xiaofeng glanced at his watch, it was already three in the afternoon. He watched Li Mubai look concerned. He couldn't help but smile.

"Brother," he said, "you still have a hell of a nerve! You only came back yesterday and you are leaving today. It is already three o'clock, you will only be able to walk some thirty to forty li before dark. And I'm afraid it will snow again!"

Li Mubai turned his gaze to the thick black clouds that were gathering. Indeed, it was probably still going to snow a lot. He suddenly thought back to last summer. After leading Yu Xiulian and her mother to Xuanhua, he walked south. He had crossed the Juyong Pass where he had wounded several mountain brigands. Then, after a torrential rain that had soaked him to the bone, he had spent the night in an inn in Shahe Township. The next day, Wei Fengxiang, The One Who Surpasses Lü Bu, found him and they clashed. Li Mubai had hurt him. De Xiaofeng was then residing in the same hostel as him. Seeing how remarkable his martial art was, he had come to meet him. It was over six months ago, and Li Mubai had known many vicissitudes since. He had been thrown in prison, had fallen seriously ill and had suffered a great deal. De Xiaofeng had spent a lot of money on him and worried a lot about him. But he had never complained and even wanted to act as a matchmaker for his marriage to young Yu. Although he could not understand his grief and how he was feeling, Li Mubai could only be grateful for all his attentions.

Li Mubai thought: I came back to hurry and leave, I am decidedly not worthy of De Xiaofeng's consideration. If other people notice, they will say that Li Mubai does not understand friendship. However, De Xiaofeng does not appear angry at all, and it is with insistence that he wanted to accompany me. He lets me go, even reluctantly, this kind of friend is so rare. He was really moved. He let out a long sigh of regret, addressing De Xiaofeng:

"Brother, you should go home! We will meet again soon. Maybe next spring! If you don't come, I'll send you someone to invite you. But life is unpredictable, who knows what will happen next year?"

De Xiaofeng gave a faint smile and thought: In recent months, by befriending Li Mubai, I have made many enemies: first Huang Jibei, then the Feng brothers from the Chunyuan agency, and finally Zhang Yujin. After he leaves, I'm afraid young Yu won't stay with me for long, so I can expect retaliation. I live in Beijing and often find myself on a mission. My opponents will not necessarily seek to kill me, but I fear an incident is inevitable. Li Mubai seems in a hurry to leave, it would be inappropriate to tell him about all of this now.

Li Mubai, who seemed to read De Xiaofeng's dismay on his face, said regretfully:

"Brother, after I leave, have as little contact with Jianghu's men as possible and don't get angry with Huang Jibei. If you have a problem, contain your anger and wait until I'm back in Beijing: I'll take care of it!"

Li Mubai held back his mount and continued:

"Head home, big brother, no need to accompany me further!"

He greeted him with a fist clenched in his other hand. De Xiaofeng stopped the cart and greeted him as well. He could see that Li Mubai was also struggling to separate. The latter then followed his horse and exclaimed:

"Please, big brother, head home!"

De Xiaofeng stared at him in the distance, down the snow-covered main road. The more the black frame moved away, the more its silhouette diminished. You could hear the rustle of the icy wind, shaking the dead willow branches. The snowflakes carried in the air formed a thick fog. De Xiaofeng had frozen hands and feet. Fuzi, chilled with cold, asked:

"Master, are we going home?"

De Xiaofeng was looking into the distance and he could no longer see Li Mubai. He was distraught for a long time and finally nodded.

"Yes, let's go home!"

Fuzi turned around and De Xiaofeng resumed his seat. They passed through the Zhangyi gate again. Morale at its lowest, De Xiaofeng continuously sighed.

As the vehicle pulled up to the Hufang Bridge, a man walked up to them as if it was an urgent matter. He exclaimed:

"Fifth Lord De, stop your cart! I have to talk to you!"

De Xiaofeng glanced at the man in rags, with the thin, pale face. He didn't seem like a stranger to him. After reflection, he recognized him. He was the one who reported Li Mubai's message. He was called something like Little Scolopendre.

"What is it?" De Xiaofeng then asked.

Wu Da, the Little Scolopendre, moved closer as if he was afraid. He said in a low voice:

"Fifth Lord De, I have just returned from your residence, I bring you a message! I recently heard that Zhang Yujin, the Golden Spear, had not actually returned to Henan at all. He and his gang reside in Baoding. Huang Jibei, the Lean Buddha Amida, sent his steward Hao San, the Ox's Head there the day before yesterday. No doubt he still wants to create trouble for you!"

De Xiaofeng jumped when he heard the news. Huang Jibei is not done with me! he thought. This Little Scolopendre may be a poor rascal, yet he knows a lot of things. I miss that kind of man right now. He replied with a falsely casual air:

"Let them work out their plan! I am waiting for them."

Intentionally, De Xiaofeng asked:

"Do you know where Li Mubai went?"

"Didn't Lord Li return to the capital last night? Didn't he come to your place?"

"I wanted to see if you knew if he was home or not!" smiles De Xiaofeng. "Well, I'll tell you: Li Mubai has left, I have just accompanied him for a while. This time around, he won't be back for a while. If you meet men from Huang Jibei, you can tell them that De Xiaofeng does not need Li's protection. I always dare to play the heroes in the capital!"

Little Scolopendre gave an embarrassed smile and immediately flattered him:

"The great name of the Fifth Lord has been known to all for a long

time!"

"If you learn anything later, come tell me quickly, and if you want a commission, do not hesitate to ask me!"

He then begged Fuzi to get back on the road. Little Scolopendre rubbed his hands, he had managed to make himself well seen by De Xiaofeng. He immediately went to a tea house to glean some information on Huang Jibei's plans.

## Chapter 28

*On their mounts, they both walk, in the snow and the wind,*

*Resentment sets in between the two companions;*

*In Jianghu, chased by many ruffians,*

*The heroine demonstrates her power.*

On the way home, De Xiaofeng reflects on this situation with Huang Jibei. Li Mubai is gone and his departure cannot be covered up indefinitely. I should send someone to reason with Huang Jibei and make him understand that I will not replace Li Mubai as the hero. If he feels up to it, he can always go get it, but he'll avoid provoking me. Unfortunately, I don't think Huang Jibei is so magnanimous. He's the type to take advantage of the situation to settle my account!

Concerned with his thoughts, he begged Shou'er to bring him another pair of boots, his own all covered in mud and snow. He was about to change his tunic when Yu Xiulian entered the room. De Xiaofeng straightened up immediately.

"Take a seat, young lady! He said with a smile."

He feared that she would question him again about Meng Sizhao or Li Mubai. She did ask him what Li Mubai had said upon his return and if he knew where Meng Sizhao was. De Xiaofeng, extremely embarrassed, could only sigh.

"He didn't teach me anything about Second Lord Meng," he said finally. "Li Mubai only spent one day in the capital, he has already left: I have just accompanied him beyond the Zhangyi gate!"

Yu Xiulian immediately changed her expression and hastened to question him:

"As soon as he got home, why has Li Mubai already left?"

"His character has always been unique. He was determined to leave, who could have stopped him? He returned to Nangong. He will undoubtedly return to Beijing early next year."

Young Xiulian's charming face darkened. She bit her lower lip and thought for a long time. She suddenly seemed to have made a decision, but said nothing. She just sighed. De Xiaofeng reassured her:

"Young girl, don't worry! You will stay with me while you wait for Li Mubai to come through Julu and send your father's disciples here. At that time, we will find a solution."

Xiulian was saddened by these words. What disciples of my father are left? she says to herself. Maybe Yu Tianjie, the Golden Darts, but he's far away in Henan. There are still the old escort guards, like Sun Zhengli, Cui San, and Liu Qing. But how could they help me? Deep in thought, she let out no particular expression. She simply concludes:

"Big brother, I'll let you rest!"

She returned to her room. Nothing unusual happened the rest of the day. The sky was darkening more and the wind was blowing harder.

In the evening, alone in her room, Xiulian reflected in the light of the lamp. Using large copper tongs, she stoked the charcoal embers in the stove. She brooded over events from Li Mubai's marriage proposal to these days. She was trying to understand why he was avoiding her like this. I'm sure he knows where Meng Sizhao is, but he doesn't want to meet with me so he doesn't have to tell me the truth, she thought. Tomorrow, I will go discreetly in pursuit of him to ask him for an explanation. If he refuses to talk to me, rather than let him go, I still prefer to quarrel with him, and too bad if people call me ungrateful afterwards! She thought it wise to go to bed early. The next day the snowflakes were falling again.

As usual, De Xiaofeng had to carry out his administrative duties. He got up early and got dressed. Shou'er accompanied him to work. Xiulian watched for his departure in order to prepare the few things

she planned to take. She waited until Lady De walked past her window to go to her mother-in-law to say hello. Xiulian took advantage of this moment to slip out of her room, carrying her things with one hand, her swords with the other. She walked along the corridor and went directly to the stables where she prepared her own horse. The servants just watched her. None of them had the guts to stop her, but some went to warn their mistress in the interior apartments. Dame De was very worried, but it was impossible for her to go personally to the stables to stop her. So she sent two maids to reason with her.

Xiulian was already outside pulling her horse by the bridle. She was about to climb into the saddle when the following two ran towards her:

"Miss Yu," one of them shouted, "come back! Dame De is worried about you! If you go, the Lord will fight with her when he returns!" The other servant stepped forward and tried to catch the tails of her dress. "I can't let the young lady go!" She exclaimed with inappropriate familiarity.

Xiulian glared at her and exclaimed:

"Try a little to see!"

The frightened old woman drew back without delay and tripped over the stone step. Xiulian laughed and exclaimed:

"No one will be able to stop me from leaving! Go home and tell your mistress that I'll be back to see her in a few months. Also thank your master for me!"

At these words, Xiulian clutched the saddle and waved her whip. The hooves of her mount sank into the snow. She left by the west of Santiao alley.

The flakes fluttered gently as far as the eye could see like goose feathers. There were few carts on the avenue, so Xiulian was able to let go. She did not know the streets of the capital. She had to inquire with passers-by in the direction of the Zhangyi gate. In the suburbs, people were fewer and fewer, the snow more and more



dense. Xiulian wore only her short ensemble and lined pants that the freezing wind blew through. She waved her whip to move faster.

The horse she had come from Xuanhua with was sturdy. The snow, sometimes frozen, made the ground very slippery and her mount almost fell several times. She had to resign herself to progressing slowly, despite her rage and impatience. Tears started to fall and she cursed Meng Sizhao. It's really not easy to find you! she thought. I long to know what you'll tell me when we finally meet! Li Mubai, I know very well that you are not a heartless man. When my father was still alive, you helped us a lot, but now alone and without support, you do not even deign to see me again. Why? Would you believe that I am just a debauched woman from Jianghu? Xiulian was saddened. Suddenly she found the wind colder and the snow denser. She held back the bridle of her horse and bowed her head. She sobbed desperately as she walked slowly. She did not know how long she had walked like this, when she heard the sound of bells behind her, then the cries of a man:

"Hey! Rider in front, step aside!"

Xiulian whirled around and saw a black horse arrive. A stout little man was riding it. He wore a black dog-skin headdress and an old sheepskin turned over for a jacket. A thick layer of snow had accumulated on the leather and the fur. From the mouth of the rider, a white breath escaped in puffs. Xiulian stopped her horse and observed him. Silent, she wondered: What can he do? The rider came closer and glanced at her, then continued on his way, whipping his mount. Xiulian stared for a moment at the stout figure of the individual, tossed about by his black steed. Would he be part of Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin's gang? They probably know that I left Beijing: would they have decided to chase me down to attack me on the way? Invigorated by this thought,

"What could I be afraid of?" She exclaimed.

She resumed her journey. The individual had already disappeared. Her sadness dissipated. She now had only two ideas in mind. The first was to find Li Mubai at all costs and demand that he tell her the truth. The second was to be careful and be on guard on the

journey. If by any chance they set a trap for her, she would not hesitate to brandish her sabers and spare no one.

That same day, she crossed the Yongding River. On the second eve, she stopped at Changxindian Township and stopped to rest. A young rider traveling alone, who comes down to the inn on a snowy evening, had much to catch the eye, but Xiulian remained calm and unfazed.

"Give me a clean room and feed my horse," she said to the innkeeper. "I am one of the guards at the Quanxing Agency in Yanqing. I have to do with the government of Daming but I will come back in a few days and reside with you again!"

At those words, how could the innkeeper have treated her without regard? He promptly prepared the room she requested. Xiulian retrieved her swords and things, then moved into the room. The innkeeper hung an oil lamp on the wall and asked her:

"Have you eaten, young lady? Would you like something?"

"Make me some noodle soup, that'll be fine."

The innkeeper nodded and went to the kitchen to prepare the dish.

"The client in the east wing," he told his employees, "is an escort guard. She has two swords with her and must be damn good at martial arts!"

Xiulian settled down on the heated kang, inside which the wood was slowly being consumed. She rested for a while but didn't feel tired. She could still hear the wind blowing violently through the window; the snow was certainly still falling. I'm over seventy li from Beijing, De Xiaofeng must be terribly worried by now, she thought with a sigh. He wanted to marry me to Li Mubai, but how could he know... She was in great pain and tears started to roll down her cheeks. She wiped her eyes and forced herself not to think about it any longer. She suddenly saw the image of the individual dressed in fur, which she had seen that very day. At that time, the snow was falling in large flakes, no one was walking on the road, outside of herself and that lonely rider, who seemed in such a

hurry. She found that frankly suspicious.

The innkeeper brought the hot noodle soup to Xiulian, who took the opportunity to ask if it was still snowing.

"It's snowing more and more," he replied. "It will be the same tomorrow! Don't worry lady, you can stay with us for several days without worries! It is really not convenient to travel in these conditions, and then, in winter, the looters reappear!"

"They don't worry me!" Xiulian retorted coldly.

The innkeeper glanced at the swords resting on the kang and again observed the charming Xiulian. The association struck him as strange. How could such a young woman be an escort guard? he thought. Puzzled, he didn't dare question her and just said before leaving the room:

"If you still want noodles, call me!"

Xiulian provided herself with chopsticks and began to eat. After a few bites, she suddenly heard a man shouting in the yard:

"Boss, excuse me! Does a Lord Li reside with you?"

At these words, Xiulian jumped and hurriedly strained her ears outside. One of the employees replied:

"Which Lord Li? What kind of business is he doing?"

"He's not a merchant," the man continued in his strong voice. "He is a young man who arrives from the capital. As it is snowing, I thought he had stopped here to rest. Does that mean something to you? His name is Li Mubai."

Xiulian dropped her chopsticks on the floor. She rushed out of the bedroom to look out into the courtyard. As before, the snow was falling endlessly. The man who had just asked these questions was none other than the fat one dressed in upturned sheep's fur. Xiulian was stunned. Could it be possible that they know each other? she wondered. Would my brother Li be staying at this hostel? Under the awning, Xiulian watched them. The innkeeper made inquiries in all

the rooms and then came back to say:

"We do have two clients called Li, but they are fur traders. None of them are called Li Mubai. Go ask the neighboring hostel, that of the Zhang family!"

Surprised at this answer, the fat man in the middle of the snow did not seem to believe it. He finally retorted, as if talking to himself:

"I've been to all the other hostels already and he's not there. Would Li have continued on his way in this weather? Well, I just have to try to catch up with him by walking at night too!"

With that, like a white sheep, he spun around and left the inn.

Xiulian stomped on the snow to run after him. At the entrance, the man had already untied his mount and was about to leave. Xiulian called out to him, waving his hand:

"Hey! Hey! Don't go yet, I have something to ask you!"

The man seemed not to have heard her. He mounted his horse, retrieved the bridle and set off south.

Xiulian watched as the figure of the horseman disappeared into the twilight. She huffed with rage and hurried back to her room. The young woman shook off the snowflakes that had fallen on her, then grabbed the still warm bowl of noodles. She stood thinking near the lamp for a long moment, puzzled. If I understood correctly, she said to herself, Li Mubai is hardly far ahead. Maybe only one day of travel separates us! If I take advantage of the night to move forward, I will probably be able to catch up with him tomorrow! She made up her mind to hit the road again without delay. She immediately paid the bill to the innkeeper, collected her things and walked out into the courtyard. Pulling her horse by the bridle, she passed the entrance to the inn. Unaware of the reason for this sudden departure, the innkeeper called out,

"Lady, stay and rest! You can leave at dawn. It's almost the third watch. On the road, with so much snow, your horse can easily slip!"

"I have an urgent matter to settle, I must continue my way!"

Xiulian climbed into the saddle and headed south. Her horse was sinking into the snow and the ground was indeed slippery. She walked slowly and saw deep tracks that she knew were those of the stout man's mount. She followed them. She did not remember that Li Mubai had mentioned such a friend. He could just be a thief, who had recognized her and knew her intentions. He could be tricking her to ambush her with his gang. What am I afraid of? she changed her mind. My father may have feared Zhang Yujin and his clique, but I have already put them to flight on one occasion - as for Miao Zhenshan, whose darts hit every shot, he died at my hand. Are there, in the Rivers and Lakes, bandits more violent and brutal than them?

The steps of the horse, which sank into the snow, were muffled, the scabbards of the sabers which struck the stirrups emitted a slight tinkling. The atmosphere seemed heavy. The landscape looked like a huge compact white block. Xiulian's black clothes were quickly enveloped in snow. She passed through several hamlets, but saw no light in the cottages. Probably because of the cold, not a single dog barked. The traces left by the man had been covered by the thick snow, Xiulian hardly saw them anymore. She whipped her horse and walked straight ahead blindly. The gray immensity of the sky enveloped her. As in her own life, Xiulian could no longer make out anything around her. The icy wind was blowing at her back. She began to cry bitterly,

After going more than thirty li, hunger seized her in the stomach and her legs stiffened. The snow had stopped. She continued ten more li and the sun began to rise. To the east appeared in the distance the first light of dawn. On the way, Xiulian passed several passers-by carrying bags. She dismounted and shook off the snow that had accumulated on her. The nostrils of her mount were blowing white mist and beads of sweat ran down the body of the animal, creating, as it fell in the snow, small cavities. Xiulian untied the scarf she had on her head and wiped her face. She straightened her hair, then got back in the saddle and resumed her walk. She quickly arrived on the outskirts of a bustling village. It was fine, many people were coming and going. By the side of the road, she found a merchant selling millet porridge. She dismounted and bought some to stave off her hunger.

The sun was rising. The snow accumulated on the roofs took on an orange color. Xiulian swallowed her bowl and immediately felt better. As she was about to drink a second, she saw, east of the street, a young man coming out of an inn. He was pulling a black horse, and from his saddle hung a canvas bag and a precious sword. The man wore a short black ensemble and a hat. Xiulian looked at him in profile and exclaimed:

"Big brother Li! Big brother Li!"

She was about to leave to meet him when the oatmeal vendor stopped her, asking for her money. Xiulian hurriedly searched her bag for what to pay for it, without losing sight of Li Mubai who seemed to have heard someone call him and glanced among the passers-by. Not seeing Xiulian, he climbed into the saddle and, through the crowd, headed south.

Both distraught and indignant, the young woman hastened to get back on her horse to pursue him. She left the village. Li Mubai was already more than half a li ahead of her, she would never have imagined that his dark horse would go so fast. Xiulian was anxious. She squeezed her mount to catch up with him while calling him and gesturing:

"Big brother Li! Li Mubai!"

Despite her cries, he continued without looking back. A mixed feeling of sadness and nervousness came over Xiulian, who began to cry. She would have liked to draw her sabers to kill him. She also thought to turn around on the spot without ever paying attention to him again, believing that he was ignoring her on purpose. Li Mubai naturally had no idea that she was following him further back. He went over all the misadventures he had encountered in his life. Facing the rising sun, he remained immersed in his thoughts.

Several horsemen, who appeared to be officials on a mission, suddenly arrived in front. One of the men was looking straight ahead and suddenly exclaimed:

"Hey! Look out!"

Li Mubai immediately turned around and saw behind him someone falling from a horse. The riders were astonished in chorus:

"But it's a woman!"

Li Mubai saw it too. The slender and agile person who stood up in the snow could only be a woman. He observed her more closely and realized that it was young Yu. Li Mubai, amazed, retraced his steps and exclaimed:

"Xiulian, is that you?"

In pursuit of him, her horse had slipped and had thus sent her into the snow. She stood up, full of rage. She didn't wait for Li Mubai to get closer to take her sabers out of their scabbards. Both blades glowed with a cold glow. Xiulian glared at him, her pretty face wearing a stern expression as hot tears flowed down her cheeks. Shaking, she shouted at Li Mubai:

"Li, will you stop ignoring me! Didn't my father tell you before he died that we were like brother and sister?"

Xiulian sobbed and stomped in the snow, digging deep holes.

"You kept avoiding me when you were in Beijing. I chased you this far. I'm just calling you and you pretend you can't hear me. So you are that kind of person! Well, I don't know you anymore!"

She put away her sabers and climbed back into the saddle, determined to retrace her steps.

Li Mubai felt overwhelmed and his tears welled up. He rushed after her to block her path.

"It's not what you think, let me explain!"

Xiulian drew out her swords again and retorted coldly:

"What? You keep me from passing, would you like to face me? I, Yu Xiulian, have no fear of Li Mubai!"

The three officials came forward to reason with them:

"Whatever happened, take the time to talk about it. There is no point in getting upset!"

"Big brother," said one of them again, addressing Li Mubai, "do not put yourself in this state. It is very common for husband and wife to argue, do not quarrel on the road, people will laugh at you!"

Li Mubai had a hard time justifying himself to the riders and Xiulian took the opportunity to rode away. He left after her and called her:

"Stop! Listen to what I have to tell you! Just a few words!" Xiulian pretended she didn't hear him. Furious, she accelerated towards a fork.

Li Mubai held back his horse's bridle, petrified, without ceasing to cry. He realized that Xiulian was wrong. He felt the victim of an injustice and wanted to explain himself. But no longer fearful of the slippery ground, Xiulian waved her whip firmly. You could make out the scabbards of the clashing sabers and the rider disappeared. Li Mubai looked over the trail she had left in the snow. He felt a retching. He wiped his eyes, holding back his mount. How could I have known she was following me? he thought. Her horse knocks her down and she begins to unload her bile against me, without giving me time to justify myself. She's really too impulsive! Ha, lala! She says she doesn't know me anymore, well, too bad! I never imagined it would end like this. Is this your share of misfortunes, Li Mubai? Or is it you who are bad? He sighed and exclaimed:

"It all happened because of her! I'm going home!"

He whipped his horse in a southerly direction.

Xiulian was mistaken in thinking that Li Mubai had ignored her. After her fall, both ashamed and angry, she fled, indignant. Li Mubai had pursued her, without her paying him the slightest attention. She had rode six or seven lis to the southwest. Turning around, she no longer saw Li Mubai in the distance. She felt a certain regret. If I faced the snow to find him, wasn't it to ask him about Meng Sizhao? she says to herself. Instead of getting angry with him, I would have done better to question him and clarify it



all! If we are to meet again, which one should ignore the other? Li Mubai was not a bad person. He had helped her organize her father's funeral, then escorted her, along with her mother, to Xuanhua. This kind of attention was not superficial and she felt bad for the behavior she had had towards him. After these thoughts, she hoped Li Mubai caught up with her. She then stopped in the snow to wait for him, but she did not see him arrive. She found it embarrassing to retrace her steps to pursue him again. What if I stopped asking for his help? Can I go on living if I can't find Meng Sizhao? My father wanted me to be a delicate and refined young girl, and kept me from fighting continually. Now I am alone, I show myself in public and travel great distances, I even killed a man. Is there something still that I can't do? Couldn't I just rely on my swords to roam Jianghu? She changed her mind and decided to go to Yushu Township in Wangdu District, clean up her father's grave and make offerings to him. She would then return home. She would go find Sun Zhengli, among others, to help her raise enough money to bring her parents' coffins and bury them in Julu.

Xiulian was progressing slowly. The sun was already high and the snow was gradually melting. There was a risk that her mount would slide more easily as it sank into all this mud. So she made it advance cautiously. After four or five li, she arrived in a small town and found an inn to rest. She changed her shoes and went to have breakfast. Exhausted, she then lay down on the kang where she dozed off until three in the afternoon. She washed her face and drank two bowls of tea which gave her strength. She thought back to the hasty behavior she had had that morning and felt that she shouldn't have spoken to Li Mubai like that. He had tried to catch up with her and she shouldn't have ignored him so brazenly. After all, he had always been considerate of her!

In the yard, the snow had almost completely melted and the ground was nothing but mud and puddles. Several customers rushed to examine the young woman. She walked through the door of the inn, naturally but cautiously. On the road, passers-by and vehicles were numerous, but the ground remained difficult to pass. Xiulian glanced at the sun and saw that it was already late. It was best to wait at the inn and not leave until dawn the next day. As she returned to the courtyard, four young men came over, staring at

her. Xiulian considered them to be mere boors and quickly turned on her heel to return to her room. She sat casually on the kang and, as she was bored, she took out her sabers. She settled down to rub them with a tissue. The more she polished them, the more the blades shone, just like her tear-filled eyes. She thought back to the time when her father taught her his techniques. At that time he was still vigorous and agile. Who would have thought that her parents would die the same year? She reflected on her hopeless youth, her future wandering and lonely life, and she was more sad. Her tears, falling on the blades, accentuated their brightness.

At that moment, the innkeeper burst into the room to ask Xiulian what she wanted to eat.

"We'll talk about that later," she replied. "I am staying here for the evening, I will not leave until tomorrow. What is this place called? Is Yushu Township of Wangdu District still far away?"

"We are in Zhuo district. I don't know how long it takes to get to Wangdu."

The innkeeper looked stunned to find Xiulian polishing her two fearsome swords. Seeing his suspicious look, she said to him:

"Leave me, I'll call you when I want to eat!"

"Good, good!" Nodded the innkeeper.

He left the room, walking backwards, as if afraid that she would attack him from behind.

Xiulian remained seated on the kang. Lost in her thoughts, she told herself that going alone on the road was not as easy as for a man. She put away her sabers meticulously. In the evening, the innkeeper brought her meal. She then turned on the lamp and closed the door to her bedroom. Xiulian was a light sleeper that night. The next day, the weather was fine. She noticed that the condition of the road was much better than the day before. She returned to her room to prepare her things and asked the innkeeper to have her horse saddled. She paid him, then left the yard, pulling her horse by the bridle and heading south.

The sun was barely rising. In the sky, white clouds floated adrift in small groups. The north wind had lost its force, but its freshness remained invigorating. Most of the snow had melted, and the snow that lingered in places had turned to ice. The roosters crowed at the top of their lungs in the yards of the cottages. Along the way, the withered willow branches hung like snow-covered threads. The comings and goings of passers-by seemed incessant. Riders, drivers of carts, carriers of bags on the shoulder or on the yoke, all were busy, and all raised their heads to watch Xiulian pass on her horse. The young woman was still wearing her short black ensemble. She had tied a handkerchief over her head. Her little shoes rested on the copper stirrups, near which were hung the scabbards of her sabers. Who could not have paid attention to this charming rider with an elegant posture and such a pretty face? Xiulian, unruffled and still with ease, whipped her mount towards the south.

After about thirty li, she left the Zhuo region. It was already afternoon. Xiulian hadn't eaten anything since early in the morning and she was starting to feel hungry. Arriving in a small village, she found a place to eat. She dismounted and tied her horse up in front of the entrance to the small restaurant. She then called one of the employees to prepare a basket of fodder for her mount, then entered the tavern. The customers seemed to be crowded together. There was an indescribable hubbub in the room. The stifling heat of the stove, the customers' garlic and onion breath, the smell of alcohol and smoke filled the air in the room. Xiulian barely dared to breathe. Most of the individuals were drivers, local ruffians, or die-hard gamblers. Apart from the landlady sitting on the floor breastfeeding her child while stoking the fire in the stove, Xiulian saw no women. Not finding the place to her liking, she left. They all watched the young woman turn around, heckling or giggling. The owner of the little restaurant followed her and called her:

"Sister-in-law, the room is too noisy. Come on, I'll find another place you can be in peace."

Xiulian, at the end of her patience, saw brick tables in front of her. They were to be used in the summer for those who wanted to eat outside, but in winter, with this cold, all the customers crowded inside. Xiulian took her place, addressing the innkeeper:

"Quickly bring me a bowl of noodles, I'll eat it here!" Noting that she was only wearing a light outfit, the innkeeper exclaimed:

"It's too cold out here, sister-in-law!"

Hearing her call her sister-in-law again, Xiulian lost patience and replied, annoyed:

"Hurry and bring me the noodles, I don't mind the cold!" The innkeeper could only do so and went back to prepare the dish. Xiulian, seated at the brick table, watched the passers-by and the carts advancing on the muddy path. The noodles arrived quickly. At that moment, horsemen rolled in from the north and halted in front of the small restaurant. The individuals, dressed in short clothes, dismounted.

"It won't be bad here!" They decided, while fixing their shining gaze on Xiulian's figure.

She recognized the four men who were staying the day before in the inn opposite hers. They had noticed her and approached. She told herself that they were certainly following her. With their travel bags hanging from their saddles and their blades exposed, she realized she was dealing with men from Rivers and Lakes. They could even be companions of Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin. They were probably chasing her and harboring bad intentions towards her. She smiled inwardly and said to herself: I would like to see if there's any bravery among them!

Indifferent, Xiulian continued to slowly eat her noodles. The men looked inside the tavern and exclaimed in chorus:

"There is no more room here, there are too many people!"

"Let's eat somewhere else!" one of them proposed, while eyeing Xiulian.

"It's too cold outside, we can't stand it!" the others nodded. "Let's go look elsewhere!"

As they were about to resume their journey, one of the young men took the tether from Xiulian's mount and left with it. Xiulian

immediately let go of her chopsticks and exclaimed:

"Hey! That's my horse, what's the matter with you?"

The man with a scar by his eye wanted to see her reaction. Faced with her annoyance, he looked at her sideways and sneered:

"Oh yes! I saw badly! I didn't know this belonged to you, little sister-in-law!"

The other three cronies burst out laughing. Xiulian instantly turned red with rage and straightened up, threatening them:

"You are shameless and you dare to laugh at me!"

She stepped forward, brandishing her whip and punching the man with the scar in the face, marking him again.

One of the tanned-faced individuals got angry and immediately grabbed Xiulian's whip. He cried, staring at her:

"Does that shrew raise her hand against my brother?"

He wanted to grab Xiulian who, without delay, tore back her whip with both hands. She quickly raised her lotus foot and struck him full in the stomach, which knocked him down in the mud. His friends were amazed. The young woman rushed to her saddle and drew her sabers, the blades of which began to shine. Their cold gleam frightened the three friends who abandoned their mounts to take shelter. The fallen man had just stood up. Seeing Xiulian brandishing her weapons, he relapsed in terror, his buttocks in the mud. The innkeeper and several other people left the restaurant at this time. They tried to reason with her. Xiulian finally put her sabers away, indignant. She paid the innkeeper for the noodles. Without saying a word, she climbed back into the saddle and left the area heading south. She couldn't calm down and wondered if the Jianghu men were all as rough as they were. She said to herself that the brave and magnanimous, such as Li Mubai, must be very rare. She couldn't help but think back to the behavior she had had towards him and kept blaming herself.

Suddenly she heard horses coming up behind her at a triple gallop.

Turning around, she saw the four slender individuals in pursuit, the man with the tanned face, who had rolled in the mud, in the lead. They looked furious. Xiulian thought about pulling out her swords and going to meet them but changed her mind. We are not very far from the village. If they seek a quarrel with me, people will inevitably come to intervene to reason with us and I do not want to be the laughing stock of everyone! To face them, she imagined setting a trap for them by luring them further away, like the maneuver she had devised to kill Miao Zhenshan. She released the bridle of her horse, which darted south, splashing the ground with sleet. All the passers-by moved aside to let her pass.

A few li later, the hamlets were far away and the road deserted. At the end of her patience, Xiulian drew her blades and spun around. She shouted at them, furious:

"What's the matter with you chasing me like that? So you don't care about life?"

Looking fierce, the four individuals had also drawn their weapons. They were suddenly impressed by this young woman riding to meet them, swords brandished. They held back their mounts and took a few steps back. The man who had ended up in the mud regained a hint of courage and questioned her:

"Hey you! The girl with the sabers who travels alone! You are certainly not an honest person. What are you doing around here?"

"You don't have to wonder! What I'm doing has nothing to do with the little Jianghu runts that you are! There is no more to discuss. If you dare, then all come together and measure yourselves against me! It goes without saying that fatal wounds cannot be ruled out: if you value your life and fear that my sabers will slash you to make your blood spurt to the last drop, hurry and get out of my sight! If you chase me down or curse me again, I won't spare any of you!"

Xiulian glared at the four individuals with her fascinating eyes. On her horse, waving her sabers, she stood up proudly, ready for a fierce battle. The riders were absolutely terrified and were pushing their mounts back. Dumb in amazement, they glanced at each other, without any of them daring to approach.

The man with the scar had understood that it was better not to provoke Xiulian. He consulted with his companions in a Jianghu dialect. They concluded that she certainly had great abilities. They did not want to suffer a setback. The man stepped forward and respectfully greeted Xiulian with a fist in his other hand.

"Dear sister-in-law," he declared. "We understand you perfectly. You are very strong and in no way impressed by the four of us. We do not want to take up your challenge. Nevertheless, two or three li from here in an easterly direction, in the hamlet of the Liu Family, resides a man whose fame is great in the Rivers and Lakes. He is good at martial arts and is called Lord Liu Qi. Would you dare to accompany us to meet him?"

Hearing them praise this individual, Xiulian thought to herself that it was surely the local great ruffian and retorted coldly:

"Whoever he is, tell him to come! I will wait for him here, but I will definitely not visit him!"

The riders, who had bothered her so much, were about to turn around to get him. Xiulian suddenly thought: What if it was just a trick on their part to get away? I'm not going to be fooled so easily, finding myself stupidly waiting for them. She stepped forward and exclaimed:

"No way you all go together, one of you is going to stay here!"

She threw a sword at the man with the scar. His mount took a few steps back. He was unable to ward off the blow: he leaned so sideways that he fell from his saddle as the blade hit him squarely in the buttock. The other three rushed all arms raised at Xiulian to confront her. She twirled her saber, keeping them at a distance. Who could have been reckless enough to move on? The individuals whirled around and walked away.

Xiulian did not chase them. She went to take a look at the wounded man who had fallen in the mud. In her fit of anger, she would have finished him off, but she changed her mind. She had no hatred for him, so what was the point of killing him. She climbed back into the saddle and addressed the scarred man lying on the ground:

"I am leaving. If they come back, tell them to catch up with me by heading south, I'm not afraid of them!"

The man nodded, moaning in pain. Xiulian put away her sabers and waved her whip. The sound of hooves echoed in the midday light.

The scarred man, slumped in the mud, lamented. Passers-by approached to help him up and set him up on a mound of barely thawed earth at the side of the path. Someone had also brought him his mount which had escaped far away in panic. Quickly, the three accomplices arrived accompanied by Lord Liu Qi and his henchmen, all armed. Liu Qi was leading the procession on his horse, followed by the riders and his men running behind. Once there, he asked:

"So where has this woman with the sabers gone?"

"She took the direction of the south," moaned the injured man. "She said you can catch up with her, she's not afraid of anyone!"

They tended the wound of the scarred man who felt like a martyr.

Lord Liu Qi's dark red face turned purple. He cried indignantly:

"She really goes too far!"

He had the injured man brought back and set off with his men in pursuit of Xiulian. They headed south, splashing everything in their path. Most people knew Lord Liu Qi, a notorious little village tyrant in Zhuo Prefecture. Seeing him so angry, they thought that the person who had irritated him would not stay alive long. Xiulian, she walked quietly without worrying about the man she had injured or this Liu Qi she had provoked.

She had traveled only a few li when she heard horses rumble behind her. She was amazed to see that they had chased her. She turned her mount around and saw four horsemen, one of them scarlet-faced and imposing in stature. Without being the least bit impressed, Xiulian hooked her whip to her saddle and dismounted nimbly. Without haste, she pulled her horse to the side of the path and took out her sabers. The men had come closer. Xiulian took a few steps to meet them. She exclaimed sternly, staring at them:



"Come on, all of you get off your horses!"

The riders held back the bridle of their mount. Liu Qi, very surprised, looked at the young girl carefully.

"What are you doing here?" he asked her. "What is your name?"

"No need to question me!" Xiulian retorted coldly. "Get off from there and come face me!"

Faced with Xiulian's composure, Liu Qi thought she must have traveled Jianghu for a long time. But her charming figure made her look like an ordinary young girl. Glancing at her posture and the heavy steel swords she was firmly holding, he realized he was dealing with a person practicing kung fu. Convinced that a woman was still easy to intimidate, he said with a small laugh:

"I am Lord Liu Qi. I have walked the Jianghu for over twenty years, and have met a bunch of brave people. Of course, lately, my idleness has not allowed me to face the young people of the new generation of Rivers and Lakes. I no longer want to get upset over trivial stories. I never imagined that today, a little girl would come to show off her talent in the area and injure one of my brothers. If I have to fight you, you must first know that I have always considered that a good man should never fight against a woman... and, you, you are just a girl! If I don't give you a little correction, I won't be worthy of being of the Jianghu old generation! So tell me, who did you learn to use swords with?"

Finding him far too talkative, Xiulian lost patience.

"What's the use of it to you to know that?" she retorted. "If you caught up with me, it's not for nothing, so come closer!" Xiulian twirled her sabers and lunged at them. With a leap, she attacked Liu Qi's horse, which tugged on the bridle to quickly take several steps back. His face was turning purple, it was getting uglier and uglier. He growled:

"Cute! Lord Liu Qi showed you kindness and you did not understand it!"

He tells his men to step aside.

"Let me crush this little girl alone!"

He drew his saber, jumped from his horse, and rushed at her.

Xiulian first tried to measure his strength by striking with her right hand. The blades collided with a crashing noise. Her wrist was numb, Liu Qi had a sore hand. Both threw themselves aside. He had strength and she would have to resort to cunning to beat him. She attacked him with her right saber to look for a loophole with her left saber. Liu Qi sneered:

"What a treacherous technique!"

He whirled his saber and the white light emanating from it spread in all directions. Liu Qi was very nimble but couldn't spot any weak points in Xiulian's technique. The latter was aware that he was someone quite capable in martial arts and she redoubled her vigilance. After more than thirty exchanges, she was in no way in bad shape. This greatly surprised Liu Qi who exclaimed:

"You are good, cutie!"

The other three had drawn their blades, ready to lend a hand to Liu Qi in this fierce fight. It seemed to them that he had the upper hand and was pushing the young woman back, so they hadn't moved yet. They got excited as they clapped their hands and said:

"Good! This time Liu Qi will defeat her!"

Their cheers barely started, Xiulian whirled around and brandished her two swords again, forcing Liu Qi to take a few steps back. The latter, breathless, parried fiercely. He rushed forward, thinking he could take advantage of this sudden retaliation to hit Xiulian. He could never have imagined that the young woman's attack would be much faster than his. She blocked the blade using her left saber and hit Liu Qi in the back with her right. He tried to leap aside, but wasn't quick enough and the blade stuck in his left leg. He immediately screamed in pain and dropped his saber to compress his thigh. His dark red face turned pale. Seeing him injured, his

companions rushed on Xiulian. Without the slightest fear, she faced them at the same time.

In a pool of blood, Liu Qi, the little tyrant, manages to sit down. His leg was in excruciating pain. He was sweating profusely in pain and could not stand up. He then shouted:

"Shit! I am hurt. What else do you have to fight for? Hurry and stop!"

The two men who were bitterly against Xiulian immediately let their guard down. They went to support Liu Qi. He was covered in mud and blood kept streaming down his leg. His hands were stained with it. He stared at Xiulian fiercely.

"I see your abilities and admit my defeat," he said irritably. "Now you have to tell me your name!"

Xiulian was very happy with her victory. Sabers in hand, she replied coldly:

"You want to know my name..."

She thought about giving a false name at first, but being alone now, she could roam the Jianghu at will, without having any qualms.

"My name is Yu Xiulian," she said. "These swords, which did not impress you, it was my father, old master Yu, the Iron Winged Eagle, who taught me how to use them!"

The graceful young woman then turned around and, with a bound, climbed into the saddle. Her little feet slipped into the stirrups. She put away her sabers and took out her whip. She took one last look at Liu Qi supported by the two men and wore a slight disdainful smile. She finally waved her whip to rush along the path, still heading south, under the bright sun.

Yu Xiulian rode all day. She reached the border of Dingxing District in the evening and found an inn. After this heavy snow, the weather had cooled slightly. She had asked the innkeeper to light a stove for her in the bedroom. From the kang where she was sitting, she slowly stoked the coals. She thought about her day and was happy

about it. This lord Liu Qi was certainly just a local despot. He was experienced with the saber, hence his fame in the Jianghu. After being wounded, he had inquired about her name, it showed that he hoped one day to find her for revenge. She was thinking about her future as she took care of the stove. Zhang Yujin and the He siblings were long-standing enemies. The list was growing now with those close to Miao Zhenshan and with this Liu Qi.

Deep in thought, she sighed. She thought back to her parents, to Meng Sizhao who could not be found, and especially to the misunderstanding that persisted with Li Mubai. She lamented that she had not yet been able to pay back the benevolence of De Xiaofeng and his wife. What foreseeable torments, if we add to that the list of his enemies! Now she could only count on herself, her pair of sabers and her mount. She then glimpsed her future and lost all ardor.

## Chapter 29

*Tears flow and hearts break,*

*In the evening, at the inn, she listens to the dreadful story;*

*Light of sabers and darkened hair,*

*From dawn, from fierce fighting, she gets drunk.*

Loud conversations and bursts of laughter arose from the adjoining rooms. Most of the inn's customers were traders. Xiulian found being a woman particularly distressing. If she had been a man, she probably would never have let Li Mubai become the hero he is now! As she was lost in thought, the door opened and an employee barged in. Xiulian asked him what he wanted and he replied:

"Are you Miss Yu?"

"Indeed," Xiulian nodded, "my name is Yu."

She got off the kang and observed him questioningly. The employee continued:

"There is a lord outside called Shi who wishes to speak to you." Xiulian, most perplexed, was surprised. She knew absolutely no one by that name. She was about to go out to meet him, but the so-called Shi was already in front of her door. Realizing that this was young Yu's room, he entered the room and said:

"Miss Yu, you got pretty damn angry today!" The man had a strong Shanxi accent. He bowed respectfully to Xiulian, which required some effort from him to bend his chubby body. When he straightened up, Xiulian recognized, to her surprise, that round, chubby face. It was the rider she had passed in the middle of a snowstorm, riding a black horse and wearing an upturned fur jacket. As he was very courteous, she said to him kindly:

"Please sit down. What business brings you to me?"

Shi the Fat did not sit down. He looked out of breath. The clerk lit the lamps on the wall and withdrew to find water for them.

Xiulian observed Shi the Fat, wearing his black pants and short, lined jacket. Sweat was flowing from his forehead. He didn't say anything. Xiulian grew impatient and gave him a stern look.

"Why did you come to find me?" She insisted.

She was going to ask him if it was he who was looking for Li Mubai the other night at the inn, but Shi the Fat wiped his face with his sleeve and said:

"I have a lot to explain to you, but Li Mubai is against it."

Surprised, Xiulian widened her eyes.

"What things? What does Li Mubai want to hide from me?"

"Don't be in such a hurry," Shi said, waving his hand. "I'll tell you everything calmly."

He began by introducing himself. He then explained his meeting with Li Mubai and how he had come to his aid. Having killed Fat Lu San and Lord Xu, he could no longer stay in Beijing. He had to leave his tavern and wander back into the Jianghu.

Hearing that he was Shi Jiang, the Serpent who climbed the Mountain, a famous figure in the world of Rivers and Lakes, Xiulian was all the more stunned. He told many stories unrelated to her. She was about to ask him to be concise when he came to talk about Little Yu.

"Young Yu was, in fact, the second son of old guard Meng from Xuanhua government, your husband, Meng Sizhao!"

Shi the Fat told him that Meng Sizhao had left Beijing to meet Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin. He had been seriously injured at the end of the fight. Shi then went to pick up Li Mubai in the capital, and Meng Sizhao died in front of his friend. His grave was in the immediate vicinity of Gaoyang. Shi the Fat was explaining tactfully and in great detail. He insisted that before passing away, Meng

Sizhao had told Li Mubai that he should marry young Xiulian, regardless of whether she would accept or not, and he had been there to hear everything.

It was as if Xiulian suddenly woke up after a long dream. She finally understood why Meng Sizhao had left the capital, why Li Mubai constantly avoided her and why De Xiaofeng hid everything he knew from her. She had all the keys to this affair in her hand. Yet she sank into the depths of despair. Tears welled up from her eyes. Confused, she felt her head spin. She sat down on the kang, stunned, wiping her face. She gave a faint smile.

"So that was it! Meng Sizhao and Li Mubai are truly loyal and devoted men, and De Xiaofeng is a staunch friend. I admire them! They fooled me! I was so easy to fool!"

Xiulian cried, covering her face with her hands. Her sobs grew louder and louder. Guests from neighboring rooms stopped chatting and found themselves in the courtyard to listen. The innkeeper took advantage of bringing the tea to enter the room. By the light of the lamp, the young woman hid her face with a small handkerchief. She was crying so much that nothing seemed to be able to stop her. Near the kang, a fat man was watching her, frowning. He looked worried. The innkeeper didn't dare say anything and stood there for a while. He finally addressed Shi:

"What should we do with your horse?"

Shi suddenly realized his presence in the bedroom.

"You can unload the saddle and feed him!" he replied. "Prepare a room for me too!"

The innkeeper nodded, put the teapot down and left.

Shi the Fat was starting to regret telling her everything. Perhaps he had been too impulsive. Seeing her in this state, he did not know what words could have comforted her. Xiulian cried for a while before pulling herself together.

"Thank you for your good intentions! Thanks for telling me

everything, I might have died without knowing it!"

Shi the Fat felt troubled to be the object of so many thanks. He gave a small smirk from his big mouth and bowed down with his hands clasped.

"These words are useless, young lady! I too learned all this after the fact. When I met Little Yu in Zhuo Prefecture, I did not yet know that he was Meng Sizhao, your husband. If I had known, I would have done everything to prevent him from fighting in honor of Li Mubai!"

Xiulian nodded, still crying and sighing. Shi, as if resentful of Li Mubai, said:

"After the burial of Second Lord Meng, Li Mubai returned to Beijing and did not allow me to accompany him. Perhaps he was afraid that I would meet the young lady and tell her everything. I have always been devoted to my friends and feared that in the capital, Li Mubai would run into Miao Zhenshan and his men. He would not have stood up to their numbers: I therefore went after him, accompanied by my young clerk. I did not enter the city, but I learned that you had killed Miao Zhenshan and that Zhang Yujin had been kicked out by the yamen. Li Mubai had arrived the day before and left the next day, on a heavy snowy day. I had planned to visit you and tell you everything. Only, with the crime that I committed, I didn't dare go to the De residence for fear of causing you trouble. So I had decided to send someone to ask you to join me outside the city, but my messenger had not yet gone to meet you as you were already in the saddle and braving the snow to leave the capital. Considering the unfolding of the facts, I thought to myself that you were going in pursuit of Li Mubai. I knew he had a few dozen li ahead at most. So I went to the hostel where you had stayed and I made a noise there to push you to move forward even at night. If you were chasing Li Mubai, and Little Yu's thoughts were found out, wouldn't he have been happy?"

Xiulian was saddened by these words and also began to blush. As she was about to justify herself, Shi continued:

"In my opinion, Li Mubai has a rather difficult character, but he is



an honest man! And then, with his aptitude for martial arts, he will not find an opponent of his size in all Rivers and Lakes! Second Lord Meng is no longer of this world. If you marry Li Mubai, it won't be dishonorable for you. To tell the truth, I, Shi the Fat, I do my best to get my brother Li to marry a good wife... "

Xiulian stopped him from continuing and exclaimed sternly:

"Say nothing more!"

"Okay, okay, let's not talk about it for now! I must also tell you: I thought I would follow you and see if you found Li Mubai. But my horse slipped in the snow and started limping. It wasn't a big deal that I fell, but it left me behind. I didn't know if you finally caught up with him. Today in the afternoon, I arrived at Zhuo Prefecture, Liu Family Township. I visited a good friend, Lord Liu Qi. I didn't expect to see him hurt. When I questioned him, I learned that he had offended you and that you had made him pay dearly for it. I didn't tell him anything special, but I hurried to catch up with you to tell you everything I just told you!"

Xiulian was extremely confused. She nodded and replied:

"Good, good! I understand. Thank you very much for your good intentions!"

Shi nodded and talked to her about other things. He noticed that she still had tears in her eyes and looked like she was getting impatient. He understood that she had had enough and dared not continue his chatter.

"Young lady, rest a little. I too will stay for the night in this hostel, we can talk about this again tomorrow. Don't hesitate to call on me and tell me how I can be of use to you. You can be sure that I will help you at the risk of my life!"

Grateful, Xiulian nodded:

"Good, good! I will definitely ask you for help afterwards!"

Shi lifted his round, chubby face. He bowed, then went to rest in another room.

After Shi left, Xiulian began to stomp her foot. She coughed and the tears she was holding back escaped. My life is very bitter! she thought. I endured the fatigue of a thousand li to find my fiancé Meng Sizhao. Who could have imagined that he was mortally wounded by Miao Zhenshan, whose existence I myself have shortened? You could say I avenged Sizhao, but that won't bring him back. How am I going to be able to continue living in this big world! Then she thought of Li Mubai. He must also be very sad at the moment. He did not want to reveal all of this to me. If it hadn't been for this affair with Meng Sizhao or if Meng Sizhao had been a bad man, then I could have remarried Li Mubai. But only...

It seemed to her that there was a curse between her, Li Mubai and Meng Sizhao, as if spirits had been busy turning the relationship between the three of them upside down. Xiulian suddenly felt totally disheartened and wanted to stab herself with her blades. But, as she held her sabers in her fine and delicate hands, she suddenly changed her mind: My father educated me and treated me like a boy. In Rivers and Lakes, I have subdued more than one bandit. Could it be that I, Yu Xiulian, cannot continue to live because I am parting with a young man? She then hit herself to stop crying and wiped her eyes. She closed the door, turned off the lamp and went to bed.

The evening at the inn was gloomy. Xiulian was in so much pain that she could not fall asleep peacefully. She armed herself with courage and made a firm resolution never to behave like a young woman again. Meng Sizhao was no longer of this world and now that Li Mubai was gone, she would definitely no longer care for him. From now on, she would only have to rely on her two sabers. Through the vagaries of a wandering life, she would perpetuate the fame of her late father. That night, Xiulian sharpened her melancholy like the sharp edge of a blade.

The next day, it was not yet daylight when she got up and asked, in an irascible voice, the owner of the inn to prepare her mount for her immediately. Shi the Fat sat up on the kang when he heard Xiulian call in the next room. He hurried to run. He first glanced through the window and asked:

"Is the young lady up?"

"Are you big brother Shi?"

Shi entered the room. It was as dark as the day before. Xiulian, however, was already dressed and had even packed all of her things.

"What?" Shi exclaimed. "Are you about to leave?"

Xiulian's tone of voice had nothing to do with yesterday's. She replied firmly:

"I am leaving. Big brother Shi, luckily you told me what you knew, otherwise I would still be confused by now. Li Mubai is my benefactor brother and I admire his martial art, but after all that has happened, I never want to see him again! There is no point in trying to change my mind!"

Shi was so frightened by these words that he hunched his neck in his shoulders. The girl's character is even more difficult than that of Li Mubai! he says to himself. I'd better not meddle in a possible marriage between them and let them do as they see fit! I will not offend the young lady: The last time she took out her sabers, she killed Miao Zhenshan and injured Liu Qi. Far be it from me to provoke her! Shi smiled and said:

"Good, good! I'm not going to give you any advice, only..."

Shi the Fat spoke in a more measured and respectful manner:

"I would like to know where the young lady decides to go when she leaves here."

"I am going to my father's grave in Yushu Township, Wangdu District, to collect his coffin there and bring it back to Julu. Then I will ask someone for help to accompany me to Xuanhua to recover my mother's!"

"Good!" Shi nodded. "But, don't you want to meditate at Meng Sizhao's grave in Gaoyang?"

Xiulian did her best to appear steadfast. She did not want to feel sorry for herself and retained all her sorrow deep within. Still, she

jumped and her tears seemed ready to spring. She bit her lip and replied:

"I will spend one day there. I will also inform the Mengs. My parents had arranged our marriage, but I never met him. I will never get married, that's it! I will remain the daughter of the Yu family and not the widow of the Meng family!"

The arrogance she put in her statements ringed false. If the room hadn't been so dark, Shi would most certainly have noticed the tears streaming down her cheeks.

Shi sighed. He thought that if Xiulian had decided never to marry, Li Mubai's love-sickness would be very difficult to cure. He hardly dared to speak because of the young woman's mood. He remained dubious, then declared:

"If so. Zhang Yujin, the Golden Spear, is not far away. I have heard that he currently resides in the Baoding government, with Tao Hong, the Black Tiger. Huang Jibei regularly sends men there to consult him, I don't know what they're all up to together. In any case, young lady, if you have to go to Wangdu, you will go through Baoding, and they will undoubtedly take advantage of it to cause you difficulties!"

Hearing that Zhang Yujin and his companions were in Baoding, Xiulian's thirst for revenge was rekindled.

"Alright, I can face them there. They are the enemies of my family. If they hadn't oppressed my father, I wouldn't be in this situation."

The mention of her father saddened her.

"Zhang Yujin is actually not that strong, on the other hand, Tao Hong, the Black Tiger, is a disciple of Feng Mao, the Golden Sabers of Shen Prefecture," Shi the Fat warns her. He uses a pair of sabers and I know he is no less gifted than his master. He resides west of Baoding City. Two escort agencies have opened there. He has several dozen famous guards and many henchmen under his command. If you go through Baoding, you will have to be very vigilant!"

Xiulian listened to him with a sarcastic smile.

"Thank you for your advice and for all your good intentions," she told him. "I will remember your words. We will see each other again one day!"

Xiulian was an expert in martial arts and he could see her proud temperament. He didn't try to get her to bypass Baoding to avoid any confrontation, as he knew full well that she would have refused. He could only greet her, clenching his fist in his other hand.

"Well, young lady, take good care of yourself! See you later!"

He returned to his room rocking his massive body.

Xiulian settled her bill and left the inn. The rays of the sun appeared in the east, but the dawn remained plunged in a freezing cold which pierced the bones. The snow had not completely melted. Xiulian climbed into the saddle and hurried forward, on the one hand to fight against the cold, on the other hand, because she wanted to arrive in Baoding that same day to meet Zhang Yujin. Her revenge would not be satisfied until she had killed him. She would then go to Wangdu to bring back her father's coffin. She suddenly thought of Meng Sizhao, buried in Gaoyang, and decided to go to his grave. Although she had never seen him, he was still her husband, and it was all because of him that she found herself wandering around like this. Tears rolled down her cheeks, but she only busied herself with whipping her mount and galloping.

The icy wind grew stronger, lifting the snow around her. Xiulian walked in one go until around noon. She slowed down on the outskirts of a small town. She found a place to eat and rest for a while, then resumed her journey south. The wind was blowing at her back. The handkerchief she had wrapped around her head flew off more than once, forcing her to dismount to pick it up. Xiulian didn't like to be messed up or covered in dust and mud. Passers-by were all noticing her, which irritated her all the more. She would have liked to meet enemies on which to vent her anger. She just whipped her mount and arrived at the Baoding government around five in the afternoon. She found an inn to rest, near the northern

pass.

In winter, it is already dark by this time. She begged the innkeeper to light her a lamp and quickly bring her some water to wash her face.

A lonely young client inevitably attracts attention, especially if she rides a horse, wears short clothes, and a pair of sabers. With her disheveled hair and her outfit covered in dust, you could mistake her for a young man. Her clothes dusted, her face washed and her hair combed, the landlady discovered that this client was in fact a woman, moreover quite lovely. The innkeeper did not dare to rest his gaze on her and asked:

"Have you eaten, miss?"

Xiulian sat cross-legged on the kang, pushing her sabers aside. She ordered some noodles. The innkeeper left the room, glancing at the scabbards. His amazement showed that he couldn't quite figure out what kind of person she was.

Xiulian took off her shoes and rested for a while. The kang gradually warmed up and she relaxed. The torments, anger, and journeys of the past few days had worn her out. And all this why? Her future was as uncertain as ever. These thoughts saddened her. The door swung open and the innkeeper entered. A man followed suit. The latter wore a gray cotton dress and an aubergine-colored waistcoat. The keeper declared:

"This is the local controller Zhang."

Xiulian eyed the man disdainfully and said, annoyed:

"If he's attached to law enforcement, what is he doing in my room? Did I invite him?"

Zhang had a long, drooping mustache, and like government officials, he said imposingly:

"I am here because you have swords. So I come to question you. Where do you come from? Where are you going? And what does your husband do?"

Before his behavior, Xiulian got angry and scolded:

"You don't have to ask me anything! Hurry and get out of my sight!"

"Hey! You, a woman, how dare you insult me!" said Controller Zhang, immediately irritated.

He was staring at her as if he wanted to grab her.

Full of rage, Xiulian put on her shoes and climbed down from the kang to correct him. She rebuffed him even more:

"You are only a local controller and not a district magistrate, how dare you bully people like this? What power do you rely on to achieve your ends?"

Xiulian retrieved her whip from her things. She was about to use it against him. To avoid any incident, the keeper intervened and said to her, bowing respectfully:

"Don't get carried away, young lady! Listen to me: these are the rules here. Anyone who shows up with a weapon should report to Controller Zhang and speak with him, be it a traveler, an escort guard, or a private guard!"

Xiulian glared at him. She replied sarcastically:

"I had never heard of this kind of practice in Baoding before!"

"This rule is very recent," said the innkeeper, embarrassed. "Lord Tao, founder of the Guangtai escort agency west of the capital, fears that people from Jianghu will come to stir up trouble in the region. So he instructed Zhang to open his eyes. There is nothing special to do: just give your name, lady, and everything will be settled!"

Behind the innkeeper, the controller Zhang saw that the young woman had a strong and violent character and she seemed ready to whip him without hesitation. Not knowing what she was capable of, he softened.

"It was Lord Tao who entrusted me with this charge. If you don't like it, just go find him!"

Xiulian grew angry and roared:

"Who is this Lord Tao? Is this Tao Hong, the Black Tiger? If I came to Baoding, it is precisely to face him. Go find him and get out of here!"

Xiulian had one hand on her hip and the other was holding the whip. She seemed overwhelmed. Tao Hong, the Black Tiger, is just a river and lake youth, she thought. He dictates his law to Baoding, and, against all odds, the local authorities are being led by the nose. It is clear that he can only be a tyrant. If he is also in collusion with Zhang Yujin, no one should dare to provoke him anymore.

Controller Zhang began to cough.

"I'm out of luck!" he cried. "Get angry for no reason, this way! She's a woman, I can't do anything against her. She even humiliates Lord Tao, the best would be that I go tell him, and that's it!"

Zhang grumbled as he left the premises, followed by the innkeeper. The latter returned shortly after to serve the noodles to Xiulian.

"Earlier," he told her, "you just had to give a random name, and that was it! Why did you provoke him like this?"

He lowered his tone, as if afraid of being overheard, and continued:

"This Zhang Er con artist is the street ruffian. Since he is a local controller and licks the boots of the Black Tiger, he is even worse than before! For this hostel for example, I have to give him money every day, otherwise he wouldn't let me open."

Furious, Xiulian retrieved her whip and knocked on the table.

"And aren't they the local bullies?" she exclaimed.

"Who says they're not? Lady, speak lower. They have eyes and ears everywhere. If one of their men heard you, you wouldn't leave this place!"

"And what then," replied Xiulian angrily, "what is so terrible about this Tao Hong?"



"You don't know, young lady?" he continued in a low voice. The Black Tiger is a wealthy lord of the region. He learned martial arts from Feng Mao, the Golden Sabers of Shen Prefecture. He juggles his two sabers in a very impressive way! High Steward Zhang of the Forbidden City is also Tao Hong's godfather. The latter therefore enjoys considerable influence. Most of the important businesses in Baoding are owned by his family. In front of his house also hangs the sign of the Guangtai escort agency for which he employs several dozen guards. In reality, he does not rely on this activity for a living, but only uses it to make acquaintances and friends. Lord Tao does not generally brutalize the population, rather, they are some of his henchmen who should not be irritated because they are capable of the worst. Last month, he invited escort guards from Henan, one Miao Zhenshan, as well as Zhang Yujin, the Golden Spear. They stayed here for several days causing mayhem before finally leaving for Beijing. They encountered difficulties in the capital. Miao Zhenshan was killed and Zhang Yujin also appears to have lost face. Miao's coffin passed by here and Lord Tao held a funeral ceremony in the middle of the street. The coffin was taken back to Henan, but I heard that Zhang Yujin is still here."

The innkeeper spoke for a long time, observing Xiulian's reactions. She said with a mocking smile:

"They don't scare me, believe me! It is to fight against them that I came here! Come on, get out now!"

The innkeeper gave her one last glance and left her.

Xiulian sat down on the kang, facing the lamp. She grumbled, thinking: I listened to the innkeeper, it is clear that Miao and Zhang did not go unnoticed here. She then gently mocked Li Mubai. Less than a year ago, he came to Beijing from Nangong. There he subdued several brave men of renown in the capital and made many loyal and generous friends. He became the most famous man in Jianghu. Huang Jibei invited Miao Zhenshan and Zhang Yujin to fight him. Not being in Beijing, Li Mubai had been the laughing stock of everyone at the time. As far as she was concerned, she had, on the one hand, murdered Miao Zhenshan, and, on the other hand, confronted Zhang Yujin, which allowed her to satisfy her revenge. She felt proud of herself and was convinced that her martial art

surpassed that of Li Mubai. Thinking about it, she thought back to their duel in Julu and the confrontation with the Demoness and her companions. His sword technique was the strangest, and he couldn't be sharper. Facing him, Miao and Zhang would have folded. If he could not measure up to them, it was because he was in Gaoyang, alongside the injured Meng Sizhao. He had run to his friend and did not have the heart to fight for any supremacy. Xiulian suddenly felt dejected and seemed to understand Li Mubai's behavior. She could not help but think back to his behavior and regretted the day when she had become angry with him, denying him, without having in mind all the devotion he had given her until then.

Suddenly there was a sound of hasty footsteps outside. Xiulian immediately regained her senses. She peered through her paper window and saw several lights flickering in the courtyard. Men yelled at each other:

"In which room? In which room?"

She then recognized the voice of Controller Zhang who answered them, "In the easternmost room!"

Xiulian understood that Zhang had gone for reinforcement. She immediately drew her sabers. She pushed open the door and stepped out boldly. In the courtyard were five or six individuals, lanterns in hand. Xiulian raised her weapons and exclaimed:

"Is it me you are looking for? Which of you is Tao Hong, the Black Tiger? Which one is Zhang Yujin? Come together, both of you! The others, if you advance, death awaits you!"

The tone she took was stern, but her voice was still soft. Two men laughed:

"Hey! Little girl, you are really terrifying!"

Xiulian didn't wait for another taunt from them and immediately pounced on them to slay them. Her adversaries, armed, managed to ward off the assault with their sabers, with a noise of clashing blades. Zhang Er, panicked, fainted on the ground and the other men dropped their lanterns. Xiulian rushed again at the two

individuals who dodged while shouting at her:

"Stop! Give us your name!"

Xiulian didn't bother to answer them. Her two sabers struck to the right and parried to the left, whirling in all directions, as her vigorous body let itself be carried away by the momentum of the blades. The individuals seemed skillful, but after a few exchanges, they already could not deflect her attacks. Stunned and unsettled, they did not know where to turn. They quickly turned around to escape where they had come from.

"Let's go now!" One of them shouted.

Xiulian did not pursue them, but one of her sabers hit one of them in the shoulder. The latter began to howl like a slaughtered pig and hit a lantern which fell to the ground. He rushed out of the inn and collapsed to the ground. He straightened up, supported by people around.

Xiulian felt happy that she had managed to expel these men with her swords. Sneering, she went back to her room. They were certainly Tao Hong's henchmen! she thought. They will undoubtedly warn him and Zhang Yujin. I just have to wait for them here! We'll see what they do. The innkeeper, bewildered, made an appearance in the room.

"Do not be afraid!" Xiulian reassured him. "I take responsibility for everything that just happened, I will not involve you in this."

The innkeeper understood that the young woman had abilities and that she must have traveled the Jianghu for a long time. He replied:

"If you say so. It would be best if you could stay a little while to block them if they come back. I cannot afford to offend Lord Tao!"

"What Lord Tao?" Xiulian got angry again. "Tomorrow I'll cut off his head and bring it to you!"

She threw her sabers at the kang. The innkeeper, trembling with terror, almost fell on his buttocks.

"Warm up the bowl of noodles!" Xiulian then ordered him.

He nodded, watching her with worried eyes. He picked up the bowl and left frowning.

Xiulian rested for a moment. She felt both edgy and happy. When he brought the dish back to her, she took the opportunity to ask him if Tao Hong lived far from here.

"He resides in the west, not more than five li from here. His henchmen never stop wreaking havoc along the way, wherever you go you will meet them. People from earlier were in a small stall to the south drinking alcohol when Zhang called them. Now that they are gone, Lord Tao himself is coming!"

"I hope he comes! If he's not here tonight, I'll go find him tomorrow morning at dawn. I am in Baoding to take revenge on Zhang Yujin, but I can very well kill this little despot in the process!"

Xiulian was elated and didn't seem to have the slightest fear. She was hungry. She grabbed the bowl to eat and the innkeeper left her.

After finishing the noodles, she put the container and chopsticks back on the table and went to sit on the kang with her legs crossed. Absorbed in her thoughts, she was biting her lower lip when she suddenly noticed a slight commotion in the courtyard. Believing that it was the Black Tiger and Zhang Yujin came to look for her, she quickly drew her swords and left her room, ready to engage in a fierce fight. It was actually the watchman who passed in the main street to ring the third watch. Xiulian laughed. She thought: These men have lost face, how come they don't dare to show up? Zhang Yujin would he have guessed my presence? Could it be possible that he dreads facing me, knowing how terrible I am? Xiulian closed her bedroom door and, furious,

"Who could wait for them all night? Tomorrow, if they don't dare to come, I'll go find them!"

She turned off the lamp, put her sabers next to her and lay down on the kang. Exhausted from the fatigue of the journey and the events of the day, she fell sound asleep.

She woke up at dawn, to the rooster crowing in the yard. She hurriedly put on her shoes and got off the kang. She suddenly thought back to the night before and said to herself: I have already made it this far, why should I not continue on my way? No matter what, I will confront Zhang Yujin and injure him, even fatally. I will then go to my father's grave! She decided to leave the place without delay and go to Tao Hong's house, to meet Zhang Yujin. She opened the door to her room and called the innkeeper to bring her some water for her toilet. Then she settled her bill and said:

"Quickly prepare my horse. I go to Tao Hong, the Black Tiger. In this way, I prevent them from coming back to your place to cause disorder."

The innkeeper immediately complied, as if he was dying for Xiulian to go away. He rushed into the courtyard while Xiulian collected her things. She hung her bag in the back of the saddle and her two sabers below.

Xiulian always wore her tight clothes and her black handkerchief around her head. She pulled her horse by the bridle and left the inn. The icy wind was blowing hard; the rays of the sun were making their appearance. On the main street, passers-by were few. As she was about to climb into the saddle, someone called to her from behind:

"Young Yu!"

Xiulian turned and saw in the distance a chestnut hitting her like an arrow. The rider was a young man with a round face. With his big eyes and thick eyebrows, he looked fierce. He sported a small fur jacket and a black satin ensemble. He was wearing light boots, inserted in white copper stirrups. Behind him followed three men, dressed in short clothing, who appeared to be villagers. One of them carried a long spear on his shoulder, the handle of which was coated with white wax, while the fringes of golden threads which adorned it had become entangled. The young horseman immediately seemed familiar to Xiulian, as if she had already met him. Her horse's bridle in one hand, one of her sabers in the other, she stared at him and asked sternly:

"Are you Zhang Yujin, the Golden Spear?"

The horseman gave him a nasty look.

"Since you especially come to meet Lord Zhang, how can you not recognize him now?" he said. "If you have the courage, follow me, because I would be ashamed to face a woman in the middle of the street!"

He held his horse back to turn it around and looked back, smirking. Xiulian's lovely face darkened with rage and she cried out:

"Stop bragging, wherever you go I'll follow you. Today I am going to cut off your head and offer it as a sacrifice to my father!"

Xiulian quickly climbed into the saddle and rushed after him.

Zhang Yujin held back and walked slowly to prevent his men from running after him. He waited for Xiulian's mount to come closer.

"Young Yu, our hatred is as deep as the sea," he said coldly. "Seven years ago, my stepfather was killed by your father, my wife was recently injured by your hand, and my uncle Miao Zhenshan tragically died under your sabers. No need to insult each other, let's walk a little longer and find a large enough area for a fight to the death!"

"Good," she nodded, furious. "Today, I will finally be able to avenge my father!"

Xiulian whipped her mount, following in the footsteps of Zhang Yujin who headed west. They had only gone half a li when they found themselves facing a huge snow-covered space. There were no cottages or passers-by around. On his horse, Zhang Yujin suddenly picked up his spear and spun around to attack violently. Xiulian, who was following him closely, was not yet holding her sabers to ward off the surprise attack. Fortunately, with a nimble hand and keen eye, she quickly stepped aside and grabbed Zhang Yujin's spear.

"What kind of hero are you then?" she cried. "Are you also going to use secret weapons?"

Zhang Yujin knew that Yu Xiulian was fierce with her swords. He had planned to attack her while she was still unarmed to finish it quickly. He never imagined that she could block his Golden Spear with her hands. He hastened to free his spear, but who would have thought that this frail and delicate young woman had so much strength? Zhang Yujin tugged firmly several times, but he still couldn't pull it from her. He began to shout:

"Dirty shrew!"

At that moment, the three individuals drew their short blades and brandished their flail (22). They had not yet approached when Xiulian tugged sharply on the spear with her left hand, while pulling one of her sabers out from under the saddle with her right hand. She jumped quickly from her horse, twirling her saber, which fell on Zhang Yujin's animal. The latter whipped his mount to move away in a few gallops. Zhang had just picked up his spear. He also dismounted. He rushed fiercely at Xiulian, waving his spear.

"Little bitch running the Jianghu! Do you think Lord Zhang is afraid of you?" He roared.

The young woman retraced her steps to take out her second sword. She then waved them both and returned to the charge. The three cronies moved aside and the two horses moved away, panicked.

Yu Xiulian and Zhang Yujin engaged in combat. Zhang Yujin's technique was treacherous. He relied on the length of his weapon to provoke and annoy Xiulian, and he expected inattention on her part so that he could immediately react and stab her with his spear. But Xiulian was measured, she knew her sabers were not helping her against such a long weapon. It would have been easy for her to lose. So she had another plan, she wanted to try, by skirting the handle of the spear, to cut off his fingers. After more than twenty exchanges, her sabers were twirling, radiating a cold light, and she still moved closer and closer to Zhang Yujin. He did not retreat, on the contrary, and blocked Xiulian's two sabers with his lance. Suddenly, a sharp noise is heard. Xiulian had just cut off a part of the shaft of the spear. Zhang Yujin took a few steps back, then attacked again. He punched up and down, stung towards the throat, then towards the feet. But still, Xiulian blocked him. He couldn't

hope for the tip of his spear to get any closer to her.

Zhang Yujin was starting to have more rushed attacks. Xiulian, she, more and more tenacious, hugged him closely. Seeing that he was in bad shape, the three accomplices approached as reinforcement. A horseman suddenly rushed east, followed by several dozen armed men. The three individuals jumped for joy and exclaimed with great gestures:

"Magnificent! It's perfect! Lord Tao is coming!"

Xiulian, absorbed in her duel with Zhang Yujin, paid no attention to the men. She just slashed and punched from all sides, hugging Zhang tightly. She wanted to kill him, before tackling these newcomers.

Tao Hong, the Black Tiger, approached on his horse and exclaimed:

"Stop! Stop!"

Zhang Yujin took the opportunity to turn away from Xiulian's attacks. With her swords drawn, one vertically, the other horizontally, like a large T, Xiulian stared at the rider. Tao Hong was no more than twenty-three, twenty-four. The Black Tiger was indeed born with dark skin and appeared to be a small man with good vigor. He was dressed elegantly and exactly matched a wealthy lord who was adept in martial arts. Xiulian, not out of breath, stared at him with her pretty eyes and asked:

"Are you Tao Hong, the Black Tiger?"

Tao Hong observed this graceful young woman, quite charming, armed with her pair of sabers. He seemed smitten. He dismounted and respectfully greeted Xiulian with folded hands. His face wore a proud smile.

"You are Yu Xiulian, aren't you? Ha ha! Nice to meet you, I've wanted to meet you for a long time!"

Xiulian found his manners to be quite loathsome. She twirled her sabers and took a few steps forward.



"What do you have to say? I don't have time for you! I came to fight against Zhang Yujin to avenge my father, so stay away and don't worry about it, otherwise I will kill you too without hesitation!"

Tao Hong stepped back and his expression changed.

"What terror! What terror!" he mocked. "Lord Tao has studied martial arts for over ten years and his weapon of choice is the pair of sabers. I never imagined meeting a young woman who wanted to kill me with two sabers. I know you are the daughter of Old Eagle Yu from Julu, so you must certainly know your stuff. Lord Miao died at your hands and now you dare to come and provoke me. Yesterday evening at the inn you fought several of my men. In short, you are quite gifted! Approach! Today, my sabers will clash against yours!"

He greeted Zhang Yujin with folded hands and added:

"Big brother, rest a moment and leave her to me!"

He received from the hands of a villager his sabers with shining blades. A red silk cloth hung from their sleeves. A saber in each hand, he pushed his henchmen aside and exclaimed:

"Come on, come closer!"

Xiulian was overwhelmed. She wanted to see what his technique looked like. She attacked him by brandishing her sabers, the latter greeted her with his own. The four blades fluttered and clashed, the red silk fringes swirled in all directions, and the two adversaries whirled following their sabers. The Black Tiger was precise and energetic, his technique fierce. Xiulian made small, slender hops, turned around quickly, and wouldn't let it go. After more than twenty exchanges, Zhang Yujin and his comrades in arms found that the two opponents were evenly matched - they greatly enjoyed the confrontation. The villagers stood there with weapons in their hands and staring.

Tao Hong and Xiulian grew closer. The four sabers seemed to be tangled. The fight got harder and harder, but soon one of them was sure to lose his life. Zhang Yujin was starting to get anxious. The

moment he grabbed his spear to help Tao Hong, he suddenly fell and slumped to the ground with a thud, dropping his sabers beside him. Xiulian rushed forward and attacked mercilessly. Zhang Yujin and the dozen villagers in Tao Hong's service rushed at the young woman, brandishing their swords and raising their spears. Xiulian left the wounded Black Tiger to fight against all these men. They thought they would bring her down quickly by attacking her together. They would then notify the authorities or bury her themselves. They hadn't imagined Xiulian so terrible. She kept twirling her sabers, it was really impossible for them to approach. Xiulian was not inadvertent, and whether it was with a spear or a saber, none of the men were able to move forward.

The fight had been going on for a while and the young woman had already injured two villagers. Zhang Yujin enraged and brandished his Golden Spear. Xiulian defied him with one sword and with the other countered the assaults of the men. She had been battling for a long time and her strength was starting to wane. She whirled around and fled east. She rushed at full speed towards her mount in the distance, which was scratching the soft snow. Her opponents did not intend to let her escape. They chased her, insulting her:

"Dirty bitch! Don't hope to run away like this!"

Xiulian was scurrying off. She grabbed her mount and quickly climbed into the saddle, her two sabers under her arm, then galloped east. She turned her head towards Zhang Yujin and the others, and smiled at them as if to say, "If you can, then go after me!" The men rushed after her. Zhang Yujin picked up his horse and rushed off in pursuit, spear in hand. Xiulian wanted to turn around and fight to the death against him to avenge her father in this way. But she was still too weak to engage in a new fight, especially since he was not arriving alone and a dozen armed individuals followed suit. Despite all her mastery, she could not have overcome all these men! Xiulian sheathed her sabers then waved her whip to squeeze her horse.

She progressed rapidly for a moment, then brought her mount to a halt, out of breath. She glanced back and didn't see the slightest hint of Zhang Yujin and his men. Xiulian sighed while feeling happy. She thought, however, that she had faced Zhang Yujin twice

without killing him. She regretted not having been able to accomplish her revenge. She hastened her horse, hoping to find a small tavern to drink and rest before continuing towards Yushu. Suddenly she heard a man calling her:

"Hey! Wait! Miss Yu, wait for me!"

## Chapter 30

*Loaded with sand, the wind blows across the desert expanse,*

*Crushed with pain, on the solitary grave she bows;*

*In the fine rain, the day is fading,*

*The strange visitor is the bearer of dramatic news.*

Surprised, Xiulian wondered who would call her that. She turned and saw a stout rider on a black horse. It was Shi Jiang, the Serpent who climbed the Mountain. This man is really strange, she thought. How could he find me here? Shi the Fat had moved closer. She questioned him proudly:

"I have just faced Tao Hong and Zhang Yujin in a fierce fight. Did you know about it?"

Shi the Fat, breathless, nodded:

"I know, but I haven't seen him. Zhang Yujin, this guy, he knows me and I will never surpass him, so I didn't want to show up. I have a disciple who has been in Baoding for a few days. He noticed your arrival. He told me that your art is very impressive and that you equal Li Mubai. For him, Zhang Yujin would certainly have perished in your hands, if they had not been so numerous!"

Xiulian smiled at these words.

"I hurt Tao Hong, the Black Tiger, but I don't know if he's dead."

"It seems not," replied Shi. "I heard that he had left the scene, supported by several of his men."

"I have no personal revenge against Tao Hong," she continued. "I didn't want to mortally wound him, but just inflict a small beating on him so that he would stop oppressing the people of Baoding. Zhang Yujin is my enemy. I am enraged not to have killed him!"

"For now, you have to get used to it. Young girl, you are very good at martial arts, but you cannot overcome all these men on your own. Put your revenge aside for now. Later, you can ask Li Mubai to lend a hand to confront him!"

Xiulian raged inwardly, Why should one always call on Li Mubai when encountering difficulties? Shi then asked him:

"Lady, where are you going now?"

"My father's grave is in Wangdu district. I would love to go there to clean it up and make offerings!"

"From here to Wangdu, there must be two days of travel. On the other hand, you are only one day from Gaoyang. I propose this to you: you go first there, to the Yellow Butte, to the tomb of the Second Lord Meng, it would be legitimate between spouses. You will then continue your journey to Wangdu to go and cry over that of your father."

Xiulian was suddenly heartbroken. She did everything she could to contain her grief. She finally nodded decidedly:

"It's okay, I'm going to go to Gaoyang and his grave."

Shi the Fat, the Serpent who climbed the Mountain, would show her the way.

Xiulian whipped her horse and they rushed east. That same evening, they arrived in Gaoyang. It was already dark, so it was not practical to reach the cemetery. They found an inn on the outskirts of town to spend the night. The next day at dawn, they got back in the saddle and went to the southern suburb, to the Yellow Butte. The cold of dawn pierced them to the bone. From the surrounding slopes, the north wind carried the sandy soil which lashed faces. Xiulian, overcome with grief, paid no attention, but with his build, Shi Jiang found it difficult to move forward. They left their mounts to graze at the edge of the field, then Shi the Fat led Xiulian past the grave.

Shi, with his back to the wind, pointed to the grave and said:

"There, this is where Second Lord Meng lies. My old brother behaved very peculiarly. He endured poverty and suffering, and did not want anyone to feel sorry for him. I met him at Faming Temple, Li Mubai's home. He was helping him recover from his illness and tragically died in an affair that involved my brother Li!"

Xiulian already couldn't contain her tears. She leaned against the small stele with one hand and with the other, she hid her face, stifling her sobs. It was as if someone were stabbing her heart with a blade. In the midst of this raging wind, laden with dust and sand, she was in so much pain that she felt dizzy and her legs no longer seemed to carry her. She thought: Meng Sizhao, we have never met, but since my childhood and according to my parents' wishes, I was your bride. My father felt in danger and my family migrated north because of their enemies. We avoided them, of course, but he mostly accompanied me to Xuanhua for my wedding.

Unfortunately, my father died on the trip. In agony, he instructed Li Mubai to escort me and my mother until Xuanhua. Li Mubai had dueled me to ask for my hand, but later found out that I was already engaged to you. He was magnanimous and straightforward, never again hinting at it. During the whole long ride, he did not speak to me once without restraint. In Xuanhua, we were told that you had run away the previous year because you had caused misfortune by mutilating a vile spirit. Li Mubai was very admiring of you, however. That day I was very puzzled. I went to see Li Mubai at night to ask him to find you, so that you and I are finally reunited. The next day, he resumed his journey, without giving any further news.

Subsequently, with my mother, we lived at the expense of your family who treated us harshly. My mother fell ill and died. Your older brother humiliated me then on every occasion, but for the sake of you, I swallowed my anger without protesting. After my mother's temporary funeral, I went looking for you with my mount. I then followed De Xiaofeng and Yang Jiantang to the capital where I only met Li Mubai once. Everyone kept telling me that they didn't know where you were. In fact, you fled when you heard of my arrival in Beijing. It wasn't because you suspected feelings between Li Mubai and me, but rather because you found yourself too miserable and in such a dire situation that you feared I would

despise you. But how could I have had such an attitude?

You were mortally wounded for a story that concerned Li Mubai, and in agony, you again spoke of I do not know what union between him and me. How could it be so? Not only is Li Mubai opposed to it, but for my part, from a sentimental as well as rational point of view, it is absolutely impossible for me to comply with it. With Li Mubai, we have now definitely cut ties. I come to see you here today, but you are nothing more than earth. If you had known me, how would you have behaved towards me? Tell me, what sufferings will I now endure?...

Xiulian cried for a long time in front of the grave. The dusty, arid ground soaked up the tears that ran down her cheeks. The sand-laden wind had deposited a thin yellow film on her delicate face, in her hair and all over her body. Xiulian's sobs never ended.

Beside her, Fat Shi seemed worried. What a bad thing! But what a mess! he thought. Because I met Li Mubai, I then got to know Meng Sizhao. I left my little tavern there and I don't even dare to go into Beijing. Now, I find myself following this young woman here, facing this wind. Besides, her character is worse than that of Li Mubai or Meng Sizhao. I dare say nothing to her "for some inappropriate word, she would brandish her two sabers and I am no match for her! Shi continually frowned and sometimes winced, due to the wind lashing his face.

After a long time, he noticed that the young woman was still crying, although less loudly. He said to himself: This case has shaken the solid Li Mubai. Meng Sizhao's ideals and dexterity brought him straight to the grave. And now, if young Yu, who killed Miao and fought Zhang, died of grief right here, I, Fat Shi, would be totally discouraged and disillusioned with this earthly life and I would just have to renounce the world and to become a paunchy monk! Shi then tried to reason with her:

"Young girl, stop crying! After all, the dead cannot be resurrected. You owe it to yourself to be worthy of him, and that's it! Didn't you want to continue towards Wangdu? Let's go back to the hostel to rest for a while, then we will resume our way!"

Xiulian recovered when she heard him talk about Wangdu: I still have a lot to accomplish, crying to make yourself sick doesn't mean anything. She finally wiped her eyes and said:

"Come on, let's go back to the inn!"

They returned to their horses, which neighed at their approach. They climbed into the saddle and returned to the inn.

There, Xiulian dusted herself off and washed her face. In the bedroom, she was left alone, absorbed in deep reflections. Shortly after, Shi the Fat came to see her.

"The wind is blowing too hard today," he told her. "Why not stay another day here and not leave until tomorrow for Wangdu?"

"I think I will rest here until tomorrow. I won't resume my journey until dawn, but you don't have to come with me. I thank you for your help. I will be indebted to you one day for this!"

This response enchanted him and Shi replied:

"Lady, I would never dare to accept it. I'm someone who likes to take care of other people's affairs too much, and besides, I don't have anything planned at the moment. Why don't I take you for a walk in Wangdu? If you have to transport your father's soul, I can help you."

"The earth is frozen at the moment, remarked Xiulian, it will probably be necessary to wait until next spring. If you have nothing to do at the moment..."

Xiulian thought about it and sighed before continuing:

"Luckily, you were Meng Sizhao's friend. Maybe you can replace me to go to Xuanhua to meet old guard Meng from the Yongxiang agency. You will tell him as much as possible about the details and circumstances of his youngest son's death, and make an effort to tell the family to collect his body from Gaoyang. You can also explain to old guard Meng that, although I am his daughter-in-law, the wedding did not take place. So I prefer to remain young Yu, but I swear to him never to remarry. The gold hairpin, which is their



wedding present, forever seals the agreement of my union with Meng Sizhao and I will always carry it with me. It will be the mark of my emptiness... "

Tears started to fall. She finally continued:

"You can still help me. You will see with Liu Qing, the Little Buddha Warrior, who stayed there, to bring my mother's coffin back to Julu, no matter what he says. No later than the third lunar month of this year, so I will be able to bury her with my father!"

Shi the Fat agreed bluntly.

"Don't worry," he exclaimed. "Count on me to accomplish what you ask of me. When someone gives me a mission, I never let them down. I'm leaving immediately!"

"It's too windy today! Big Brother Shi, why should you leave immediately?"

"No," he retorted. "Me, when I have to do something, I have to do it right away. It's my character, though it makes me even more extravagant than Li Mubai and Meng Sizhao! Besides, my clerk is still in Baoding, and I have to go get him to help me!"

"What is he doing in Baoding?" Xiulian asked, puzzled.

"Well," Shi smiles, "this guy is my spy! He is in Baoding to find out about what Hao San, the steward of Huang Jibei, is up to with Zhang Yujin and his men. You can not imagine it, but of all, it is really Huang Jibei that's most treacherous! This scoundrel does everything to appear benevolent, but his heart is filled with venom. He has a relentless hatred for Li Mubai and De Xiaofeng. One day or another, he will find a way to set a trap for them!"

Xiulian sighed:

"The men of Jianghu attach importance to the martial arts, which they rely on to determine who is stronger. People like Huang Jibei do not fight in the open. They rely solely on their cunning and power to crush their opponents! It is simply cowardly and despicable! Let's do it like this. If one day you learn that Huang

Jibei wants to try something against De Xiaofeng or Li Mubai, warn me, I will come and help them to pay my debt to their benevolence!"

Xiulian's face suddenly saddened. Shi the Fat kept nodding his head. Then he returned to his room to prepare his things. He reappeared shortly after to inform the young woman that he was leaving. Xiulian gave him final recommendations. Shi put on his old sheepskin jacket, then left the inn. He climbed into the saddle and faced the raging, sand-laden wind. He rushed north-west.

Xiulian truly esteemed Fat Shi. This character was worthy of being a knight errant of Rivers and Lakes. That day, she therefore stayed to rest at the inn and left the next day for Wangdu. After two days of traveling, she arrived at Yushu Township. She walked directly behind the temple of Guandi, to her father's grave. Dry vegetation had invaded it and it seemed abandoned. Xiulian knelt down and sobbed for a long time. She then went to the temple to meet the monks. They did not seem to recognize her. At her father's funeral last spring, her mother was still there, Li Mubai was also by their side. At that time, Xiulian was delicate and discreet, like a young child. And now her face bore the marks of travel fatigue. She was dressed in an outfit that hugged her body and she looked much taller. She pulled her horse by the bridle, had sabers, and looked just like a young escort guard.

A monk observed her for a long time before finally recognizing her.

He exclaimed "it's the young lady Yu!"

He led her without delay to a cell intended for contemplation and exclaimed:

"If you had arrived two weeks ago, you might have come across Lord Sun!"

"What Lord Sun?" Xiulian hastened to ask, surprised.

"The one who is in his thirties and is very vigorous. He was on horseback and carried a saber. Ten days ago he was in Julu. He came to Lord Yu's grave to burn paper money and mourn his

master. He asked me a few questions, then walked on, most likely in the direction of Xuanhua."

There was no doubt that it was Sun Zhengli, the Eagle of the Five Talons. He was going to Xuanhua to see her and probably did not know yet that her mother had recently passed away. Xiulian let out a few tears and thought: If he goes to Xuanhua, he will most likely meet Shi the Fat there. They will then chat with Liu Qing, and will undoubtedly bring my mother's coffin back to Julu. I am reassured that it is so. Xiulian explained to the monk that she wanted to return next spring to retrieve her father's coffin. The monk accepted then asked:

"Miss Yu, how come Lord Li is not with you?"

At the mention of Li Mubai, Xiulian grieved. She remembered her father's funeral, which he had helped organize. She felt a deep sense of friendship towards him. The day she caught him in the snow and spoke bluntly to him, she must have made him sad, and she too felt sorry. If it weren't for the story with Meng Sizhao, she probably would have gone immediately to Nangong to find him to apologize. Now that was impossible. Even if she met him again, she would ignore him. How could they have come to this?

Grieved, she left the temple. She climbed back into the saddle and set off again south. The road was familiar to her. She had used it in the spring when her father took them north. She remembered the place where they had met Li Mubai, and where they had fought against He Sanhu and his companions, and even the place where her father fell from his horse after his days in prison. The desolate landscape that stretched as far as the eye could see plunged her into infinite sadness. Xiulian walked for several days. In the freezing wind, she finally arrived in Julu, in the last hours of the setting sun, around four in the afternoon. She entered the city and walked down the alley where she lived. She found herself in front of the entrance. She knocked on the door and tears rolled down her face.

From inside, a man asked curtly:

"Who is it?"

Xiulian recognized Cui San's voice and replied:

"Big brother Cui San, open up! It's me, Xiulian... I came back!"

Cui San hastened to open the door and found himself facing the crying young woman.

"What? Is the young lady coming home alone?"

Xiulian nodded without stopping crying and entered. Cui San retrieved her horse then closed the door. He begged Xiulian to come inside. Before fleeing with his family to escape the revenge of his enemies, the old guard Yu had assigned Cui San to watch over the house. Cui San was married, but his wife resided in the Outer Wing and all the rooms in the inner courtyard were left empty. Cui San presented it to the young woman, then Xiulian took a seat on the kang to rest, without stopping her sobbing.

Cui San wiped his eyes with his sleeve and said:

"After you left, I had no news. This fall, a man from the north told us that old Uncle Yu died on the way, and a young man from Nangong, named Li Mubai, escorted the young lady and her mother to Xuanhua. I always wanted to visit you, but I never raised enough for the cost of this trip. Last month, Sun Zhengli borrowed for his trip. He first wanted to go to Xuanhua to see the young lady and her mother, then continue on his way to the capital to meet a friend who would undoubtedly find him a job. It's been almost a month since he left, did you meet him on your way?"

"I didn't see him, but I know he was going to Xuanhua."

Cui San's wife served the young woman a bowl of tea. After taking a few sips, Xiulian informed Cui San that her mother was no longer of this world. She then explained to him all the adventures that had happened to her, as well as the details of the disappearance of Meng Sizhao, who died tragically for Li Mubai.

Cui San listened to her, wincing in grief and stamping his foot. He then tried to comfort her:

"If so, you're going to stay and live here! Let's wait until we have

buried Master and Lady Yu together to think about your plans!"

"What future projects could I think about? Anyway, I will remain the young Yu girl. I will not forget that I was promised to the Meng family and I will never get married!"

At these words, Cui San did not dare to console her further. That same day, he prepared the rooms for the inner wing, where Xiulian was to reside.

Xiulian therefore resumed her former home.

She dressed as before in her sober black clothes, and never left her house. Cui San and his wife were busy making tea and lunch for her. Xiulian didn't do anything in particular with her days. From time to time she immersed herself in needlework. She did not abandon the martial arts. She knew her enemies were numerous; one day she would have to face them. From dawn, she would do boxing and saber movements, and she sometimes trained at night in kung fu, leaping on rooftops and crossing walls.

The people of Julu quickly learned that the lovely and incomparable daughter of Old Eagle Yu had returned home. The news reached the ears of Liang Wenjin and Xi Zhongxiao, who often resided at the Taidehe grain store. Since last spring Liang Wenjin was beaten up by young Yu, he had never had the courage to reappear in Julu. Knowing that she and her father had left the district, he dared to return. Xi Zhongxiao naturally associated with him again, and the two even maintained a prostitute there. Each month, they stayed for ten days in the district.

The two were at the Taidehe grain store when they heard the news. Liang Wenjin wanted to go back to Nangong immediately and Xi Zhongxiao laughed at him.

"What? Are you afraid of her?"

"I took an oath not to come back to Julu while this Yu was there."

"You have a good memory, you never forget when you've been beaten! Haven't you heard what is being said? Old Yu and his wife

are both dead, as well as the second lord of I don't know what Meng family. Young Yu returned home, still a virgin and a widow. I dare to bet that she does not want to stay that way, she who is not twenty years old! Wenjin, you should take this opportunity, I guarantee you success!"

Liang Wenjin hesitated, but said to himself: No way to get hit stupidly again! I, a young lord of the Liang family, buy my wives, it makes things easier. Who would want to prick their hands with this rose? He laughed happily and exclaimed:

"Zhongxiao, I won't be fooled by your words. If you feel like it, you just have to risk it, if you succeed, I will really admire your abilities!"

"No, I always made sure that it was the women who came to beg me," replied Xi Zhongxiao, "it is not me who will look for them. At the moment, Li Mubai is back home, we should go and provoke him a little so that he plays us a tragic opera aria and we have a little fun."

Liang Wenjin was very angry when he heard about Li Mubai.

"Why would I go find that guy!" he cried. "He went to Beijing. He hung around there for almost a year, finding nothing to do. He comes back all black and thin now, he is not worth a Su Qin (23). He finds himself at home without seeing anyone. No, I will not go!"

Xi Zhongxiao was well aware that Liang Wenjin couldn't stand the idea that Yu Xiulian might fall into Li Mubai's arms. Wenjin thus refused to see him again. Xi Zhongxiao didn't insist and just laughed. Since his friend wanted to go home without delay, it was best to go back to Nangong with him. Once in the country, he did not forget Yu Xiulian's case and went to Li Mubai's home, a visit he did not fail to conceal from Liang Wenjin.

Since Li Mubai's return from the capital, his uncle and aunt have been cold and distant. Thin, he looked very bad. He looked worried all day long. His uncle and aunt suspected him of having frequented prostitutes and of having fought with several men to reach this pitiful state. Li Mubai paid no attention to them and brooded over

the misadventures that had occurred during the year. He kept thinking about the elegant and virtuous Xiulian with the chivalrous spirit, the tragic end of Xie Xianniang, Meng Sizhao, this courageous young man with tenacity who was full of future, tragically died for him, but also to beile Tie, for his love of justice and his insight in revealing his talent, and to De Xiaofeng, for his generosity and enthusiasm.

Let's forget about the misunderstanding with Yu Xiulian, he told himself. I wonder where she could have gone after the snowy day of our separation. Did she go back to Julu or Xuanhua? I would like to know to be finally reassured. After Xie Xianniang died, I helped her mother financially, hope she can last long enough without suffering from cold and hunger. I will have to go to Xianniang's grave one day!

Li Mubai imagined that during the warmth of next spring, he would go back to Beijing. He would first go to Gaoyang to meditate at Meng Sizhao's grave and make offerings there. Then he would walk to the capital. He would drop by respectfully to thank the beile Tie for his kindness. He would then go find De Xiaofeng, as he had promised on the day of his departure. Finally, he would go to Xie Xianniang's grave to exhaust his last remaining feelings for her. On the other hand, he hardly cared about the deep hatred that Huang Jibei harbored towards him, the confrontation with Zhang Yujin that had not taken place, or even the stories of Shi the Fat. He was most demoralized. He was only thinking of ways to pay back for his friends' bounties and no longer wanted to confront the Jianghu men for any supremacy. Since his return, he had only seen his close relatives and refused to visit his old friends or comrades. Alone, Xi Zhongxiao had come to visit him once. Li Mubai had explained to him that he had suffered from the freezing wind and was not feeling very well and cut short their interview.

It was the middle of the twelfth lunar month. The day before, heavy snow had fallen again. The weather was bright now. Li Mubai went out in front of the cottage for a little walk. His feelings obsessed him relentlessly. He was trampling the snow, when he saw a man walking in the distance. As he approached, Li Mubai recognized Xi Zhongxiao. His coming bothered him and he wondered what he was

coming back to do here.

Xi Zhongxiao came wading in, a smile on his face. He greeted his friend and exclaimed:

"So, Mubai, fellow student, are you feeling better today?"

Li Mubai came to greet him and answered him with a smile:

"It has snowed, the path is not easily passable. What brings you again?"

"I would have come yesterday if it hadn't snowed. I come first to see if you are well and then to... "

He tapped Li Mubai on the shoulder, laughing.

"If I come," he continued, "it is to talk to you about a marriage matter again!"

Li Mubai began to get annoyed. He scowled and retorted:

"How can you still come and play with me!"

"I'm not playing with you, it's really for a marriage story. Come on, let's go back and discuss it!"

Xi Zhongxiao took him by the arm and they entered the room. Li Mubai seemed concerned.

"Sit down," he told him. "Let's chat about something else. I don't want to talk about any wedding at this time!"

Xi Zhongxiao remained silent but his slight smile showed that he didn't want to stop there. He adds:

"In this freezing weather, I ran to share this happy news with you. You have not yet deigned to listen to me that you are already arresting me! What is this story? You must understand that I have only good intentions towards you. You are now over twenty years old and still not married. You went to Beijing without bringing back a wife. I need to take care of you a bit. Last spring, I brought you to



Julu to measure yourself against young Xiulian, the daughter of Old Eagle Yu, and propose to her. The case did not succeed, but you were able to realize that on earth there was a lovely young lady, an expert in martial arts. Only since then, you've been mad at me because you think I played a trick on you."

On behalf of Xiulian, Li Mubai sighed and waved his hand.

"It's the past, what's the point of talking about it again!"

"No," Xi Zhongxiao replied, "you have to. If I come today, it is precisely about Yu Xiulian!"

Li Mubai was convinced that Xi Zhongxiao had heard of a young girl to be married off and that he intended to be the go-between for him. He was immediately saddened to learn that it was actually Yu Xiulian, and didn't seem to want to listen to him any longer. Xi Zhongxiao continued, however:

"A few days ago, I went to Julu with Liang Wenjin. It seems that young Yu Xiulian has returned home. Her parents are no longer of this world. Wasn't she promised to the Meng family who run an escort agency in the Xuanhua government? In the end, Second Lord Meng passed away as well. I heard that he was injured in a fight with I do not know who and succumbed. Yu Xiulian therefore finds herself at home, virgin and widow at the same time. But so young, how could she remain a widow? Rather than someone else taking advantage of it, it would be best if you went back to Julu. Didn't you once meet the Old Eagle? You could use the excuse of inquiring about his burial site to visit her. So, counting on your presence and the fact that she already knows you, you could try to conclude your union smoothly and I guarantee you that it will fall into your hands. We will then drink the liquor of your wedding. Isn't that fabulous?"

Xi Zhongxiao displayed a smile that left his mouth wide open. He seemed ready to grab Li Mubai and leave on the spot.

Li Mubai looked distressed to the point that tears were forming in his eyes. He felt endless admiration and compassion for Xiulian. He knew now that she had arrived safe and sound at Julu. He calmed down and sighed for a long time. He thought about explaining to Xi

Zhongxiao the ambiguous bond he had with the young woman and Meng Sizhao. But he changed his mind, because for him Xi Zhongxiao was still a trivial man who talked too much. If he told him anything, he would inevitably divulge it. His uncle would be all the more unhappy when he heard about it, and people would chat about young Yu. Li Mubai therefore gave a faint smile and replied:

"Me, Li Mubai, how could I behave like this! Young Xiulian is a widow, if she wants to remarry, I don't have to know. I did know her father, old guard Yu, and had talked to him a few times, but we did not have a deep relationship. Old Yu is dead, his family did not perform any ceremony. How could I now visit young Yu to offer her my condolences!"

Xi Zhongxiao, who had not really understood the meaning of these words, replied:

"But do not worry! You can find another way to introduce yourself to her. You will only have to cross the threshold of her house for my young sister-in-law to fall into your arms! Mubai, in my opinion, you and Yu Xiulian are predestined. As soon as she gets over the death of that guy, that unlucky Meng, she'll agree to marry you!"

Li Mubai couldn't bear that Xi Zhongxiao tarnished Meng Sizhao's memory. He started to get angry and stamp his foot furiously:

"Hey, stop talking about this! I have nothing to do with this Meng or with young Yu! So stop beating my ears with them!"

Faced with Li Mubai's sudden outburst, Xi Zhongxiao looked grim.

"What?" he exclaimed. "Why are you getting angry with me? I'm trying to find you a wife, I can't believe you don't want one. Are you worried that I might get some profit from it?"

Li Mubai huffed and ignored him, turning his back on him.

Xi Zhongxiao glared at him. He noticed that his shoulders and neck were much narrower than before. That guy hung out in the capital for awhile, he thought. He found himself in misery and returned to the country. Now he doesn't even dare to hear about marriage. He

gave a cold smile and said:

"Li Mubai, you don't want to go to Julu, so that's it! Why should you get mad at me? Let's not spoil our good understanding between classmates because of this silly little girl. Let's not disappoint our master!"

Hearing Xi Zhongxiao insult the young Yu in this way, Li Mubai was further enraged, but the mention of his master suddenly plunged him into deep depression. He suddenly thought back to the years spent with the knight Ji Guangjie who had taught him his art. His disciples were numerous, but he had always treated him with special consideration. It was behind the backs of others that he introduced him to his knowledge and his extraordinary skill, acquired during a lifetime. It was Ji Guangjie's desire, who had been a great name in the world of Rivers and Lakes, and who had performed many righteous and courageous deeds, for him to be honored. Li Mubai would never have imagined that because of a sentimental affair, he would find himself without the slightest will, becoming unworthy of the tireless efforts that his master had made to transmit his art to him! He felt devastated, and couldn't tell when Xi Zhongxiao had left. He remained seated in a chair with his head in the air, sighing and huffing continuously. He was reassured for Yu Xiulian, but remained deeply tormented by the deaths of Meng Sizhao and Xie Xianniang. He had no more aspiration and life seemed dull to him.

The end of the year arrived, followed by the first fruits of spring. After offending Xi Zhongxiao, Li Mubai received no more visitors to his cottage. In the blink of an eye, the second month of the year passed. The peach and plum trees would soon bloom. All these lovely spring landscapes were all the more annoying. Li Mubai spent his days at home tormenting himself. His health was increasingly fragile and he worried, realizing that if he continued like this, his life would be in danger. He therefore thought of packing up to go back to the north and go to the capital, in order to keep the promise he had made to De Xiaofeng and to meditate on Xianniang's tomb.

He had decided to leave without having fixed the date of departure. That evening, at dusk, a fine, dreary rain suddenly fell, plunging the

room into darkness. Li Mubai was about to light his lamp to read and clear his mind when he heard the neighing of a horse and a man banging on the door leaves. Surprised, he wondered who could come and see him at this late hour. He left the house and exclaimed in front of the entrance:

"Who is it? Who are you looking for?"

A big man's voice answered, imitating the mannered tone of a young woman:

"Open quickly! It's me, Yu Xiulian! Cuixian is with me!"

"What?" he cried both surprised and angry. "Who dares to laugh at Li Mubai?"

He hastened to open the door to correct the individual and found himself facing a portly man who was laughing out loud. Despite this fine and opaque rain, Li Mubai recognized Shi Jiang, the Serpent who climbed the Mountain. He cursed while smiling and exclaimed:

"Boss Shi, what business brings you to my place?"

"Li Mubai," he said, "greeting him respectfully with folded hands, have you had any health problems since we last met? I present myself today at your honorable home to pay you a courtesy visit, and also..."

Shi the Fat walked through the front door, pulling his black horse by the bridle. Puzzled, Li Mubai showed him a peach tree in the yard to tie his mount to, then invited him into his home. While lighting the lamp, Li Mubai asked again:

"I know very well that if you've come to see me this far, it's to talk to me about an important matter. What is it then?"

Shi the Fat started by sitting down. He took off his rain-soaked waistcoat and said, wiping his long mat with a piece of cloth:

"This is indeed an urgent matter. I come from Beijing and I rode night and day to find you. But for now, let me rest a bit."

All the more worried to learn that Shi had rode relentlessly from the capital, Li Mubai hastened to question him:

"What is it about? Hurry and tell me!"

When Shi the Fat walked through the door, his face was all smiles. He now assumed a serious expression and said:

"Don't you have a little idea?"

"Could it be possible that something happened to De Xiaofeng?"

"Well done," agreed Shi, "that's it. In the Forbidden City, inside the Imperial Palace, several treasures have disappeared. Huang Jibei, to appease his hatred, instigated the great steward at the Palace, Eunuch Zhang, to falsely accuse De Xiaofeng of being the main perpetrator of the thefts. De Xiaofeng was arrested and placed in the prisons of the Ministry of Punishment and many very wealthy personalities were also compromised. I'm afraid the life of De Xiaofeng and his whole family is in danger!"

"Quickly tell me the details of the case!" Li Mubai cried, devastated.

"I don't know everything. It started because of a prominent trader in the capital by the name of Yang Junru."

Li Mubai suddenly remembered this stout man. He had met him when he arrived in Beijing, at the ruelle aux Pierres, in the company of De Xiaofeng. He had gone with them to a brothel.

"I know him," he commented, "he runs a pawnshop."

"Indeed," continued Shi, "he is very well known in Beijing. He has opened many banks in the capital and his family is very wealthy. Last month, he received several dozen pearls in his services, as well as calligraphy paintings in Zhang's name. It is certainly not a big deal in itself, but the imperial censor has decided to open an investigation. Many treasures have disappeared in the Imperial Palace, and apparently these few pearls and paintings were among them. Yang Junru was therefore immediately arrested, as were several eunuchs and two imperial guards. This case has absolutely no connection with De Xiaofeng. Only he knew Yang Junru well

and immediately tried to argue for him. Huang Jibei took the opportunity to mount a blow against him. He said that Lord De was the main perpetrator. De Xiaofeng was thrown into prison and his residence searched. Only the beile Tie and Qiu Guangchao came to his aid and lined up the bribes in his favor, all his other acquaintances slipped away. I know that you are a friend of De Xiaofeng, and if he has alienated Huang Jibei, it is a little because of you. He's languishing in jail now. Even if you can't get him out of there, you owe it to yourself to go see him to show him your devotion!"

Li Mubai could no longer sit. He said bitterly:

"We've known each other only a short while, but our bond is strong. When I left Beijing, on a heavy snowy day, he accompanied me beyond the Zhangyi gate and we made an appointment for this spring. I was planning to leave for the capital soon, and against all odds, here you are! Thanks for riding day and night to warn me. Good! I leave immediately. Let's not linger here any longer."

Seeing that Li Mubai was leaving without delay and that he would travel in one go to see his friend again made Fat Shi admire him.

"Really, I esteem you Li Mubai!" he exclaimed, raising his thumb. "The Iron Hand didn't befriend you for nothing!"

Li Mubai bustled about packing his things. He finally said:

"Wait for me outside for a moment, I'll say goodbye to my uncle."

"Okay!" Nodded Shi who went out to untie his horse from the peach tree.

Shi the Fat opened the doors of the entrance. He waited for Li Mubai in the half-light, in the fine rain.

In reality, Li Mubai did not want to say goodbye to his uncle Li Fengqing, who was already in bed at this time. He knew he would oppose this hasty departure. Li Mubai took some paper and dipped his brush in the ink to leave him a note. Tears escaped him as he wrote it down. He then extinguished the lamp, retrieved his bags

and his precious sword, then left without a sound. He left his things to Shi and returned to the yard to prepare his mount at the back of the house. His uncle's bedroom was dark. He led the animal outside and closed the wooden doors behind him. Pulling their horses by the bridle, the two companions left the hamlet.

The night was already deep and the rain was falling harder. The two men were quickly soaked. Shi the Fat stopped walking.

"Let's get in the saddle," he said. "Go to the capital! Me, I have to go elsewhere first. We will meet again in Beijing in a fortnight."

Li Mubai just nodded. He knew that Shi still had secrets and that it would have been pointless to ask him where he was going.

"Good," Li Mubai replied. "After all, you've never met De Xiaofeng. You don't have to go back to Beijing to scramble for him!"

"What I'm doing is not for him, but to help you. Do you have enough money for the trip?"

"Yes, I have enough."

They then climbed into the saddle. When they reached a crossroads, Shi the Fat honored him with a fist in his other hand, and said:

"Goodbye, I'm heading west!"

Li Mubai honored him as well. Shi the Fat branched off at the crossroads and sprang up on his black mount.

Li Mubai also whipped his horse and took the wide road to the capital. He rode for two days without stopping, then rested for one night. From daybreak to the waning moon, he hardly cared about the difficulties of the journey. He wanted to progress quickly to see De Xiaofeng again as soon as possible. He made only one stop during the trip: crossing Gaoyang district, he went to the Yellow Butte to meditate at Meng Sizhao's grave and shed a few tears. He then climbed back into the saddle and set off again at a triple gallop. Worried, he no longer took into account distances or time. He only remembered leaving Nangong at the end of the second lunar month. When he finally arrived in the capital, the willows

were barely green and the buds of the peach blossoms had not yet bloomed.

Li Mubai entered Beijing. Regardless of where to rest, he headed straight into the inner city, Third Lane in Dongsi Pailou, De Family Residence. The places were the same, but the atmosphere was completely different. The imposing red door was closed and there was not the shadow of a passerby or even a car. Li Mubai dismounted and tied his horse to a pole in front of the entrance, then climbed to the threshold and knocked on the door.

He waited for a moment before hearing someone ask him:

"Who are you looking for?"

"Hurry up and open it," he exclaimed. "I am Li Mubai, friend of the Fifth Lord De!"

The man hastened to open it. Both surprised and delighted, he exclaimed:

"Lord Li! If you came back, everything will be fine!"

The servant greeted him respectfully. Li Mubai recognized Fuzi, De Xiaofeng's driver.

"Take care of my mount," he said to Fuzi, "I'm coming in to see Lady De!"

He didn't wait for a servant to announce him and walked straight into the inner courtyard. He walked along the corridor, crossed the reception hall and then met a young servant coming out of the interior apartments. Li Mubai called out to her:

"Go and inform Lady De or the matriarch that Li Mubai has arrived from Nangong to meet the Fifth Lord!"

The maid had never met him, but she knew he was her master's close friend. She greeted him respectfully and replied:

"Our Lord is..."



"I am aware of the matter concerning the Fifth Lord," interrupted Li Mubai, "and I would like to meet Lady De without delay!"

They crossed the inner courtyard. She went to her mistress's room to make her report.

Dame De was delighted to hear of his coming. He was the person her husband admired the most. Lately, the family had been bothered many times, disturbing the tranquility of the home. Confident, she hoped Li Mubai would put an end to all these inconveniences. Dame De told her attendant to let him in immediately.

The De family were Manchu, and followed the protocols to the letter. It was impossible for a man who was not a relative to go to the interior apartments. But Li Mubai was not just anyone, and her husband considered him a brother. The first time he came to the residence, De Xiaofeng invited him to his apartments, and he met his wife and mother. He had therefore been above all suspicion ever since. The servant begged him to enter. Dame De came to meet him. He didn't dare look her in the eye. He hunched over and called her sister-in-law.

Tears were already streaming down Lady De's cheeks. While doing the usual things, she said:

"Brother Li, sit down! Do you know what happened to your brother?"

His voice suddenly became tragic. Li Mubai let down his tears.

"I know my older brother was wrongly accused by the authorities, victim of a plot. I set off for the capital as soon as I heard about it, but I don't yet know all the details of the affair. Please, sister-in-law, enlighten me and I will do my best to find a solution!"

While speaking, Li Mubai took a seat on a rosewood stool. The servant brought him some tea, which Li Mubai did not drink.

Weeping, Dame De explained that by rescuing his friend Yang Junru, De Xiaofeng had been wrongly charged. Huang Jibei had

bought Eunuch Zhang, steward at the Palace, who had fabricated a false accusation. These facts were consistent with those reported by Shi the Fat. Dame De informed him that her husband had been transferred to the Ministry of Punishment. Beile Tie and Qiu Guangchao had spent large sums of money so that he would not suffer ill-treatment. Rumor had it that he could not be absolved: he would most certainly be found guilty, but a death sentence was unlikely. Only Huang Jibei continued to harass him. By a private bank that had belonged to Gros Lu San, Huang Jibei had obtained false IOUs and regularly sent his men to report to the residence to claim the sum. His henchmen demanded the repayment of tens of thousands of liang. Dame De had her husband questioned in prison. He had claimed that he had never had any debts and had never had contact with the private banks of Gros Lu San. But the bank staff were very insistent and fully expected to get the money back before the end of the month. The employees brought several witnesses with them: Feng Long and Feng Huai from the Chunyuan Escort Agency, as well as Mao Baokun from the Sihai Agency, to whom De Xiaofeng had never had the slightest sympathy. One day, they presented themselves at the entrance of the residence to demand the payment of this debt, it was impossible to reason with them and they wanted to fight. Since De Xiaofeng's indictment, the authorities had searched the residence twice in less than a month. Every time the officers left, valuables were missing. Also, in order to bribe the authorities, the family had already spent more than three thousand liang of money.

The De had inherited many assets. In his life, De Xiaofeng had spent a lot of his fortune on maintaining relationships and friends. If it was necessary to raise a few tens of thousands of liang of money, then the family would have to mortgage their possessions. The household once had several servants and maids, but since the affair the men had behaved without restraint and gathered every night to bet. Lady De had sent them away and there was now only Shou'er, Fuzi, a cook and a servant, who were left quite alone.

Li Mubai was saddened by listening to Lady De's explanations. He was indignant at Huang Jibei and cursed him inwardly: Mounting a blow against De Xiaofeng and throwing him in prison wasn't enough for you? Why are you going after his wife and trying to

extort money from her by sending her brothers Feng and Mao Baokun? You only deserve death! Beijing is a huge city, how can we tolerate this kind of individual engaging in reprehensible acts with complete impunity? It's not normal! Well, Huang Jibei, I am in the capital again, you will not escape a duel to the death! Li Mubai tried to comfort Lady De:

"Sister-in-law, don't worry and don't be heavy-hearted. I am in Beijing now, I will not let Huang Jibei and these men blackmail you. I'm going to visit the beile Tie and ask him to quickly find a solution for my big brother. If tyrants think they can dictate their laws by bribing corrupt officials, I, Li Mubai, will never allow anyone to be persecuted to death for no reason! Calm down, sister-in-law. My big brother has always been kind to me, his friendship has always been fraternal: if I have to die to save him, I will!"

Li Mubai wiped away his tears with a handkerchief. Dame De was sobbing. She left it to him and offered to stay at the residence in the outer apartments "so he could be there when the individuals with the bogus debt claims came up. Li Mubai accepted without hesitation and expressed a wish to greet De Xiaofeng's mother. Dame De explained to him:

"Considering her advanced age, I didn't dare say anything to her. She thinks Xiaofeng is on a mission outside the capital. During the searches, I bribed the officers and begged them not to go to her apartments so as not to alarm her.

"If so, I won't say hello to my aunt. I go without delay to the prison of the Ministry of Punishment to see my big brother Xiaofeng, then I will go to the residence of the beile, to see the Second Lord Tie. Sister-in-law, do you still have something to tell me?"

"No," she said, wiping away her tears. "I have just sent Shou'er to prison. If you manage to see your brother, above all tell him not to worry and to give us some news."

"Don't worry, sister-in-law. As soon as my big brother knows that I am in the capital, he will be relieved. And then, be sure that he was certainly not brutalized in prison!"

Dame De then asked him if he needed the money.

"I don't need anything," he replied. "I still have a bank book that my older brother gave me last year. I have barely touched the money in this account and will have enough for the next few days."

Li Mubai then straightened up and bowed very respectfully to Lady De before leaving her. As he walked along the corridor, he thought about the abject and vicious behavior of Skinny Buddha Amida and anger seized him. In the courtyard, he called for Fuzi.

"Put my horse in the stables and give him something to eat," he told him. "Get my things and my sword, and bring them to the library. From today, I will stay here to take care of the household. If the bank staff or if Feng and Mao show up again to claim anything, come and tell me, I will take care of them. If I'm not at the residence, make them wait. Tell them the best is for them to meet me because I don't have thousands of liang for them, but millions!"

Fuzi nodded and thought: Sincerely, Lord Li, we'll just have to mention your name and they'll run away. How can they still claim anything?

Li Mubai moved into the library to freshen his face and change his outfit, before renting a cart and heading to the prison. During the journey, he was furious and seemed to be on the lookout. He had only one desire: to meet Huang Jibei. Li Mubai would leap to the ground and dash forward without waiting on him to box him, overwhelming him with a volley of punches and kicks.

## Chapter 31

*The reunion takes place through bars,*

*Friendship between knights and loyal words are at the rendezvous;*

*Alone, he visits, covered with green grass, the recent tomb,*

*For the souls of young women, tears of sadness flow down her cheek.*

The vehicle traveled a long time before reaching the Street of the Ministry of Punishments. He had not yet reached the door when Li Mubai saw a man who appeared to be a servant. Dressed in a gray lined jacket and a black waistcoat, he came in front, head bowed. Li Mubai recognized Shou'er, De Xiaofeng's servant, and called out to him:

"Shou'er! Shou'er!"

He raised his head and finally saw Li Mubai sitting on the cart. Shou'er, delighted and surprised, ran up to him and greeted him respectfully.

"Lord Li," he exclaimed, "when did you arrive?"

Li Mubai asked the driver to stop and replied:

"I've been in town since early afternoon. I saw Lady De, who informed me of everything that happened! I came to see your master."

"I'm leaving him right now. If you are going to see him, let me accompany you. This case is really... "

Shou'er began to shed tears.

Li Mubai jumped off the cart and begged the driver to wait for him. He then addressed Shou'er:

"Do not worry. I will find a solution for our lord. You know how we are friends."

"Of course, of course! Our master keeps talking about you in prison!"

This sentence distressed Li Mubai.

Shou'er led the way. Seeing him arrive again, he who had just given some money to visit his master, the prison officials let them pass. A guard took charge of accompanying them to the dungeons.

De Xiaofeng had been imprisoned there for almost a month. As a renowned dignitary of the Inner Court, he enjoyed preferential treatment. The prison staff had set up a clean cell for him that had a bed. Through the window with iron bars, Shou'er called out to De Xiaofeng with tears in his eyes:

"Master! Master! Lord Li is here!"

De Xiaofeng approached. He let out a long sigh and exclaimed:

"Ha! My brother, I feared you might not come, but here you are finally!"

Li Mubai was already crying hot tears. He noticed that De Xiaofeng, although a little thinner, did not seem overly tormented.

"Big brother," said Li Mubai, "after I left Beijing, I kept thinking about the promise I made to you to see you again this spring. I heard that Huang Jibei had staged a blow against you and that you had been wrongfully charged, so I immediately set off for the capital. I was just at your place, where I met my sister-in-law, who explained everything to me, and I'm coming to see you!"

"Brother, do not worry," replied De Xiaofeng very calmly, "everything is fine. At worst, Huang Jibei will seek the support of an influential figure to sentence me to immediate beheading. As always, some of my friends would like to see me in the grave already, but that is highly unlikely. As for you, my brother, remain dignified and do not stoop to arguing with his pathetic henchmen. Since you have come, it's perfect, you will settle in the residence and watch over your sister-in-law and your nephews. Don't worry about my old mother, I can hardly believe that even though he

remains cruel, Huang Jibei still sends his minions to persecute her to death!"

"Don't worry," Li Mubai replied, "I wouldn't want to cause you more trouble. Only, if Huang Jibei comes to get me or if he sends the Feng brothers to support the bank staff to carry out this blackmail with forged documents, I will have a hard time being indulgent with them!"

Li Mubai opened his eyes wide and clenched his fists firmly. De Xiaofeng sighed.

"Brother, because of them, I didn't want you to come back to the capital. I don't care if you get me into trouble, but do you really think they are worth risking imprisonment or death over? Brother, out of ten thousand men not one is worth you. As for Huang Jibei, despite his wealth and power, he is just a despicable being."

Li Mubai, moved, said:

"This story can only torment me, because it stems from the hatred that Huang Jibei has against me. If I don't wash my older brother off suspicion, if I don't avenge him, then I, Li Mubai, will no longer be a man!"

"No, you're wrong," replied De Xiaofeng. "You don't remember, last summer, during our walk to the Second Lock, we met Huang Jibei and he paid little attention to me. I then explained to you our slight disagreement about one of my relatives. He must still be mad at me for this matter and his hatred comes from there. Huang Jibei is also not to be blamed entirely, because if I had not helped Yang Junru, I certainly would not have been involved in this matter. Brother, do not let yourself go to anger, which might get you into unnecessary trouble. For now, let's keep this rage deep inside us. This story probably won't condemn me to death. Let's let a few days go by like this, we'll discuss it again later! Brother, you have to really listen to me. Regarding the employees of the banks of Gros Lu San who come to wreak havoc in front of the residence, although it annoys me, I do not worry about it. Now that you live with me, their daring can be as vast as the sky, these men will never dare to come back to bother us. You don't realize how much you scare all those ruffians

and bullies in the capital!"

De Xiaofeng smiled broadly as he said this, but Li Mubai, outside the bars, retained a painful indignation deep inside him. After all these recommendations, he could only resign himself and nodded:

"Well, I got it. Take care. I am now going to beg the beile Tie to find a solution."

"Second Lord Tie and Qiu Guangchao are concerned about my case and send someone to check on me every day. If you visit them, you absolutely have to thank them for me."

Then, as if suddenly remembering something, he added:

"I wanted to ask you too, but maybe I shouldn't, have you heard from Yu Xiulian? Last year, at the start of winter, she left abruptly while it was snowing, without even saying goodbye or mentioning where she was going. I think she was off after you, maybe you know where she is now?"

The mention of Xiulian afflicted Li Mubai again. He remembered what De Xiaofeng had done for them and how much he had worried about them. De Xiaofeng still did not understand the nature of their feelings, however, but Li Mubai would never forget his dedication and all the care he had shown them. Even touched by misfortune, De Xiaofeng remembered his personal stories and asked for news of Yu Xiulian, he was so considerate! Li Mubai replied:

"Yu Xiulian went after me last year, but I did not meet her. On the other hand, I know that she returned to Julu. She spends her days alone and hardly ever leaves her home. Luckily, her father left some possessions and she is not left with nothing."

"So much the better, so much the better, I am reassured. Also tell your sister-in-law because she cares a lot for her."

Li Mubai agreed. They had been talking for a while and the guard showed his displeasure. Li Mubai knew how rude jailers could be and wouldn't want to provoke their sarcasm. Through the iron window he said:



"Big brother, rest. I will now see the Second Lord Tie."

"Good! Respectfully greet him on my part and thank him as well. If you can see Qiu Guangchao in the process, it will only be better! We have ceased all contact with Huang Jibei for a long time: if you come across his henchmen don't beat them too badly, my arrest already satisfies him amply. I don't want to renew his anger."

"Okay! Okay! I will go to Qiu Guangchao first, then I will visit the Second Lord Tie."

"Good idea, see him on the way. Brother, take it easy. My martial art is not worth yours, but my optimism is tougher. Although I am usually very happy at home, I do not find myself particularly unhappy in prison. It is useless that you come to see me every day, space your visits. The important thing is that you watch over my mother, your sister-in-law and your nephews!"

Li Mubai kept crying and was in great pain. He bowed respectfully to De Xiaofeng and then finally left the prison with Shou'er. Li Mubai let him return to the residence while he himself rented a vehicle to travel to the west of the city to Beigouyan, to Marquis Qiu's house. The servants told him that Qiu Guangchao had accompanied his wife to a relative's house. Li Mubai wrote him a note which he gave to the servants.

"My name is Li Mubai. I had come to visit your master and thank him on behalf of the Fifth Lord De for all he does for him."

Li Mubai was leaving the Qiu Residence and was about to get back in the cart when a tall man walked through the front door. He wore a long, lined jacket and looked like he was a martial artist. He stared at him insistently, Li Mubai recognized him then. It was Qin Zhenyuan, the boxing master of the Qiu Residence. Li Mubai had met him once, during his victory against Feng Mao, the Golden Sabers, at the Chunyuan agency. He said to himself: He knows the brothers Feng and Mao Baokun well. If he notices my presence in Beijing, so much the better. He will bring the news of my return to those ruffians who will no longer dare to lend a hand to the bank staff and will stop bothering the De family.

Qin Zhenyuan, realizing that it was indeed Li Mubai, was quite surprised. He watched him with his mouth wide open and seemed to want to talk to him. But Li Mubai ignored him and begged the driver to go to Anding Gate to Beile Tie's residence.

The driver stopped in front of the entrance to the beile. The doormen all knew Li Mubai and they exclaimed in chorus:

"Welcome, Lord Li! But where are you from?"

"I have just arrived from Nangong, Li Mubai smiles at them, I have only been in Beijing since today. Forgive me, big brothers, could any of you announce me? I would like to meet the Second Lord."

A servant quickly led him to the door leading to the main courtyard. He made Li Mubai wait under the corridor. Delu introduced himself quickly and said, greeting him with respect:

"The Second Lord agrees to receive you!"

Li Mubai followed Delu with a smile. They walked along the corridor to the inner courtyard, and settled down as in the past in the small reception room in the west corridor. Delu served tea and chatted with Li Mubai. He whispered to him in a stifled voice:

"Our Second Lord thinks of you very often. He says that under the vast sky there is no man to be found who can measure up to your precious sword."

Hearing that the beile Tie was praising him privately, Li Mubai couldn't help but think back to Meng Sizhao. Honestly, his friend's dexterity was not inferior to his. His death was so regrettable! He suddenly felt immense sadness.

Delu heard footsteps and hurried to open the door. The beile Tie then entered the room. Li Mubai immediately straightened up and bowed. The beile, a smile on his lips, asked him:

"Did you arrive today? How is your family?"

Li Mubai replied with great deference:

"Indeed, I passed the gates of the city in the morning. My family is doing well thanks to the immense benevolence of your lordship."

The beile sat down on a chair and invited Li Mubai to sit on a stool, facing him. He then questioned him:

"Have you seen De Xiaofeng? You know about this whole thing, don't you?"

"It was because I heard about this story that I rushed to the capital. I reside at the De family residence. I have just returned from my first visit to the prison of the Ministry of Punishment. De Xiaofeng instructs me to convey to you his most respectful greetings and thanks."

"De Xiaofeng likes to maintain his friendships too much," sighed the beile. "No matter how serious the facts, he will do everything possible to help his friends. This time, Yang Junru is suspected of having personally sold valuable Palace items. If he hadn't come to his aid, De Xiaofeng would never have been involved. Huang Jibei took this opportunity for revenge, appealing to someone from the Imperial Palace. Under these conditions, I find myself helpless. But reassure him. If it remains unlikely to be able to completely clear him, I can vouch: it is impossible for him to be sentenced to a death penalty."

Li Mubai constantly nodded. He couldn't hold back a few tears. The beile sighed and continued:

"I have known De Xiaofeng for so long! Whatever happens, I have to save him. As for you, do not do anything reckless in the name of your friendship with him. Huang Jibei hates you more than he hates De Xiaofeng, you have already seen that. If he decided to shell out even more money against you, at the slightest deviation, you would end up in the yamen prisons again. Should I take care of your case then? Or worry about Xiaofeng's?"

"I'll be quiet," Li Mubai promised insisting. "I'm going to get there."

Deep inside him, however, he found it very difficult to contain his anger and wanted to kill Huang Jibei without further delay. After

this discussion, he took leave of Beile Tie, who begged Delu to accompany him home.

Li Mubai got into the cart and asked the driver to drive east. With a divided heart, he grumbled: This Huang Jibei is neither a civil servant nor an officer, and relies only on his money to dictate his law throughout the capital, even the beile can do nothing against him. So do imperial laws no longer exist? I absolutely must kill him! In the past, to get me out of prison, De Xiaofeng vouched for me in the presence of the beile. He also worried about my relationship with Xiulian and always sought to marry us. This time, he's the one in prison, with an uncertain future, but he didn't want me to come to Beijing in order to keep me out of trouble. Big brother De, you really are a friend! I can only do all that you have done for me by sacrificing myself for you! ... Sitting in the car, Li Mubai let down his tears. His gaze darkened as he thought of what he was going to have to do.

The vehicle drove towards Dongsì pailou. Arrived at the third alley by the eastern entrance, Li Mubai saw to the south a group of several men. Among them, two individuals seemed to be doing business, with their black clothes and their little hats. Both wore a faded red ensemble and a long, lined jacket, and were none other than Feng Huai and Feng Long from the Chunyuan agency. Yet another, dressed in a light blue silk jacket and black satin waistcoat, was that bastard of Mao Baokun. Li Mubai understood that they were on their way to the De's again to wreak havoc with their blackmail story and couldn't contain his anger any further. He jumped out of the cart, pulled back the flaps of his robe and rushed towards the group, shouting:

"Stop you all!"

The troop advanced full of enthusiasm. Firmly clenching his frail fists in the direction of the two representatives of the bank, Mao Baokun had just said:

"This time, no matter what, De Xiaofeng's wife is going to give us the money. If they don't want to cede anything, I will have them all evacuate the residence from the youngest to the oldest. We will take possession of the premises, then let Huang Jibei dispose of it as he

sees fit."

Mao Baokun knew that if the De family paid off the debt, Huang Jibei would give each of them a few hundred liang, wasn't that interesting? Confronted with this sudden cry, all found themselves petrified. When they looked up, Mao Baokun suddenly had cotton legs, and the Feng brothers thought to grab theirs right away. They saw Li Mubai rushing at them with brandished fists. Realizing that they could no longer escape, they drew their daggers.

Li Mubai slapped his chest and exclaimed:

"Well, well, wait a little while before going to defraud the De family. I, Li Mubai, first of all would like to appreciate the extent of your talents, which have earned you the esteem of Huang Jibei!"

Blade in hand, the Feng brothers turned pale with terror and did not even dare to move a finger.

Mao Baokun, who had wanted to run away but whose legs did not have the strength, observed Li Mubai with his little disdainful eyes. He could not help but greet him and declaimed with an obsequious smile:

"Our big brother Li is therefore back in the capital. How is he?"

He had not finished speaking when Li Mubai kicked him which mowed him down and knocked him to the ground like a bullet. Mao Baokun took the opportunity to roll and get up further, then he escaped by running south. At that moment, Feng Long, the Little Lance, rushed with his blade at Li Mubai. He raised his left hand to grab his wrist and hit him with his right fist in the chest. Feng long winced in pain and took several steps back.

Li Mubai snatched his dagger from him as he passed and called out to Feng Huai, the Iron Staff:

"You only know the blows of the Fifth Lord De, the Iron Hand. Come closer, I'll let you taste the flavor of mine!"

Panicked, Feng Huai, whose abilities were inferior to that of the Little Lance, did not move. Finally, he declared a fist in his other

hand:

"I won't approach. You managed to beat my brother Mao, the Golden Sabers, how dare I measure myself against you? I admit defeat!"

"That is impossible!" Li Mubai cried furiously, grabbing him. "I ask you the questions, in this blackmail, why do you support the representatives of the banks? If you bully the De family, it's like bullying me too!"

Terrified, Feng Huai hastened to bow down.

"You shouldn't blame us. These are the ideas of the Fourth Lord Huang! If we don't bow to his will, we won't have enough to eat! Knowing that Lord Li is back in the capital, we will now refuse to listen to him. We swear it on Heaven!"

Full of rage, Li Mubai would have liked to use the dagger. He contained his anger, however, as he thought back to all of De Xiaofeng's and the beile Tie's recommendations. It really isn't worth being sentenced to death for this guy! he says to him. Li Mubai then let go of Feng Huai's hand and smiled coldly:

"Since you implore me thus, I will spare you. I have already altered the image of your fourth brother. Feng Mao, the Golden Sabers, is a brave man: after his defeat, he withdrew from the Jianghu!"

Feng Huai supported his brother by the arm, and they hurried out of the area.

The two representatives of the bank were terrified. They asked passers-by who this man was. Those who knew him exclaimed:

"This is Li Mubai, a friend of the Fifth Lord De. Last year, he beat up several escort guards."

Both men were shaking with terror. They thought: So this is Li Mubai! Our boss, Fat Lu San, didn't he die last year because of him? They hurried away, when Li Mubai chased them down, shouting at them:

"Come back!"

The two men, panicked when they saw the blade, stopped their momentum. Their faces pale, they retraced their steps and implored:

"Lord Li, if we are here, it is because our bank sent us here!"

"Do not worry," replied Li Mubai, "whoever has debts must pay them back. If the De family is indeed indebted to your agency, I will take care of it and get them to reimburse you! I would first like to take a look at the paper. Show me this document! He cried then, grabbing one of them.

The two individuals, trembling in all their limbs, took out the sheet of paper. Li Mubai let go of the man to grab it. The written act said, in broad outline, this:

"To cover a deficit, you borrowed a hundred thousand liang of silver from the bank, at twenty percent interest. You have one year to repay the bank this amount and the interest is payable in advance. This signed document will prevail."

At the bottom of the text was affixed a forged seal of De Xiaofeng, as well as the names of the mediators, in this case Mao Baokun and Feng Long who had signed with a cross. Anyone, glancing at the document, could have said it was a forgery.

Li Mubai laughed mockingly. He handed the paper to the crowded passers-by and exclaimed:

"Ladies and gentlemen, take a look at this. This is an idea of the Fourth Lord Huang! He had an IOU forged and sent these individuals to extort money from the Fifth Lord De. Needless to say, the De family is well-off and never needed to borrow money. Would such a prestigious bank accept a few pathetic escort guards to stand surety for such a large sum? Huang Jibei insults Heaven and truly despises the law!"

In anger, Li Mubai tore the document into several pieces. Some people around laughed happily, others, at the mention of Huang

Jibei, got scared and preferred to slip away.

Li Mubai scattered the scraps of paper and threw the dagger to the ground. He waved his hand away from the two bank representatives. He then paid the driver and then, furious, walked home to De Xiaofeng. He felt some remorse and thought that perhaps he shouldn't have, in his excess of anger, torn up the deed, but rather kept it and presented it to Huang Jibei. The latter was cunning: his name did not appear on the document. If Li Mubai was going to find him, he would deny everything. This further comforted him in his hatred of Huang Jibei.

Shou'er had already returned to the residence. Li Mubai told him about his meeting with the beile Tie who pledged to protect De Xiaofeng's life. He also told him about his meeting with the brothers Feng and Mao Baokun, which ended in the destruction of the IOU. Li Mubai asked him to convey his words to Lady De and reassure her. He retired to the library to rest.

Li Mubai worried about De Xiaofeng and cursed Huang Jibei's schemes. His body was hot and his heart was on fire. He couldn't sit still, but on the other hand, his head was spinning. He spoke to himself:

"You are not going to get sick at a time like this! Not only would De Xiaofeng suffer, but Huang Jibei would profit from it without any qualms."

After walking back and forth around the room, he finally lay down on the kang. He dozed off with a troubled mind. Shortly afterwards, Fuzi came to find him with a distraught look.

"Lord, come quickly! At the entrance, a fellow who claims to be an escort guard from the Sihai agency absolutely wants to meet you!"

Anger gripped Li Mubai again. It is surely Mao Baokun who sends I do not know which guard from his agency to come and confront me. He straightened up, picked up his precious sword and exclaimed:

"Fine, I'm coming to meet him!"



Li Mubai hurried to the entrance, sword in hand. The tall man was over thirty, wore a long black lined jacket, and was absolutely unarmed. He did not seem unknown to Li Mubai who wondered where he had been able to meet him. The man soon greeted him with a fist in his other hand and said with a smile:

"Mubai, it's been a while since we last saw each other!"

Li Mubai recognized him then. It was Sun Zhengli, the Eagle of the Five Talons, the disciple of old guard Yu. He had met him last spring at the Yu family in Julu. Li Mubai handed his sword to Fuzi, who was behind him, and greeted him as well, with a confused smile.

"Big brother Sun. Come in! Please!"

Li Mubai led him to the library, where they sat outside. He served him tea and questioned him:

"Big brother Sun, when did you arrive in the capital?"

"I arrived from the Xuanhua government almost a month ago, he replied."

Sun Zhengli took a sip from his bowl of tea. His behavior seemed sincere. In his powerful voice, he told him how the past year had unfolded.

"After you came to Julu last spring, following the unfortunate story that led you to their home, old guard Yu has not stopped praising you. He said that even after walking the Rivers and Lakes for more than twenty years, he had never met a person as talented in martial arts and as loyal as you. Brother Li, now my master is no longer of this world, I can tell you: the old man often repeated to me with a sigh that he regretted having already promised his daughter to the Meng family in marriage, because he would have liked to adopt you as a son-in-law. How could he have feared Zhang Yujin then?"

These words made Li Mubai confused and sad. He sighed as Sun Zhengli continued his story:

"Zhang Yujin wanted to go to Julu to fight my master and he was

very tormented. The young lady and I had absolutely no fear of the Golden Spear and we told him, "So don't worry. If he comes, we will be able to counter him. If we can't do it, we can always ask Li Mubai to come from Nangong to help us." Only, after your duel with young Yu, my master seemed uncomfortable with you. He was also worried that something would happen to his daughter during a clash that she wanted to participate in. If anything bad happened to her, he would be sorry for the Meng family. He thus made the decision to leave without delay with his wife and daughter.

"I knew my master very well. He had absolutely no fear of Zhang Yujin! The old man was certainly not as ambitious as he used to be, always competing for first place, but he was by no means impressed by this youngster from Jianghu. I knew what he wanted deep inside him. He had decided to take his family to the government of Xuanhua, then to meet the Golden Spear for a final fight. After their departure, more than six months passed without hearing from them. One day, I heard that old Yu had died in Yushu Township in Wangdu District!"

Sun Zhengli wiped away his tears. Li Mubai, at his side, heaved long sighs of regret. He continued:

"I cried for my master. I wanted to go immediately to his grave in Wangdu. I also wanted to make sure that Lady Yu and her daughter had arrived in Xuanhua. Only, brother, you know my situation, I have no property and I only rely on teaching boxing to earn the few liang that allow me to eat. I was not able to raise enough money for my travel expenses. Last winter, I stopped my lessons. I had the idea of leaving for the capital to see my brother-in-arms Mao Baokun again to ask him to find me a job and thus more easily collect some money. So I borrowed a horse to get away from Julu. I first went to Yushu to mourn my master, then to Xuanhua, where I then learned of Lady Yu's passing.

"I was very anxious. Afterwards, Liu Qing, the Buddha's Little Warrior, explained to me as an aside that she had gone in search of the Second Lord Meng and that I should therefore not worry about it. He also told me how you helped them organize Master's funeral and how you escorted them to Xuanhua. Fortunately you were there. For this, Liu Qing and I, we are infinitely grateful to you. I

also learned that in the village of Shahe, you had defeated Wei Fengxiang, the One who surpasses Lü Bu, and that in Beijing, you had defeated Feng Mao, the Golden Sabers, and beaten Huang Jibei, the Lean Buddha Amida. Your reputation is immense. If I came to the capital, it was to find a job, but also to meet you.

"Only Liu Qing insisted that I stay with him in Xuanhua. He asked me to wait until the end of the year to leave. He would thus repay the debt he owed the Meng family, then resign and then help me bring Lady Yu's coffin back to Julu. I thought we owed it to ourselves to do this, so I decided to stay in Xuanhua. Shortly after, a stout guy showed up at the agency. His name was Shi Jiang, the Serpent that climbed the Mountain..."

Li Mubai smiled inwardly upon hearing that Shi the Fat had gone to Xuanhua. What kind of man can he be in the end? Why is he struggling so hard for a matter that does not concern him?

Sun Zhengli continued:

"Fat Shi had been sent by young Yu Xiulian, who had instructed him to carry her mother's coffin to Julu. Through his coming, we learned of the death of Second Lord Meng. He also told us that young Yu had killed Miao Zhenshan in the capital and was now in Julu. He also informed us of your return to Nangong. I was finally reassured. Shi the Fat stayed in Xuanhua for over a month. Knowing that it was only a casket to transport, and that Liu Qing and I could take care of it very well, Shi left us under the pretext of another urgent matter to be settled.

"At the end of the first lunar month, Liu Qing took Lady Yu's coffin to the south, picking up the master's coffin in Yushu Township. He brought them back to the tomb of their ancestors in Julu, so that husband and wife could finally rest in peace side by side. At the same time, Xu Yuting from the Yongxiang Agency and two other men left for Gaoyang at Yellow Butte, to bring the coffin of Second Lord Meng back to Xuanhua. Many of them went south, so I didn't go with them. I took the path to the capital on my own. In Beijing, my brother-in-law Mao Baokun arranged to find me a job at the Sihai agency. My days are now spent there idly.

"I didn't know you were back. Instantly, Mao Baokun, returned to the agency, informed me. He told me that you were staying with De Xiaofeng's family and that you had just beaten him up in the street. He wanted me to go find you to correct you. I just smiled at him and ran over here to pay you a courtesy call. Brother Li, I want to thank you for taking care of my master's funeral and for your kindness to the young lady. And now, tell me, how did this hatred between the families of Huang Jibei and De Xiaofeng come about? Finally, who is telling the truth and who is lying?"

Li Mubai now knew that the coffins of old guard Yu and his wife had been brought back to Julu by Liu Qing and that guard Xu Yuting had taken care of transporting Meng Sizhao's to Xuanhua. He was henceforth appeased for the souls of the deceased. Sun Zhengli's thanks troubled him, however. Shi the Fat went to Xuanhua and met Sun Zhengli, but he probably didn't tell him anything about the complicated relationship between Yu Xiulian, Meng Sizhao, and myself. It would be embarrassing to tell him about it! At Sun Zhengli's final question, his resentment resurfaced. It was full of indignation that he told him in detail the origins of this hatred and the abject actions of Huang Jibei.

Li Mubai could not imagine the upright character of Sun Zhengli, the Eagle of the Five Talons. He also had no idea of his impulsive and vigilant temperament. At Li Mubai's explanations, Sun Zhengli lost his temper and exclaimed, stamping his feet:

"It's a shame! In a city as big as Beijing, do you let a tyrant dictate his laws as he pleases? Could he implicate someone without any accusation? I'll be honest, since I came to the capital, Huang Jibei invited me a few times to eat. He also gave me money. I am fully aware that he wants to soften me up to have recourse to me when needed. This is why I did not touch what he gave me. I now know that he is not a man worthy of the name and neither is my brother-in-arms Mao Baokun. They humiliate women and harm innocent people. I will go and explain myself to Mao Baokun and cut the bridges. I then collect the money Huang Jibei gave me to return it to him, and I arm myself with my sword to confront him in honor of the Fifth Lord De. I will give free rein to my anger for this famous hero whom I admire!"

Sun Zhengli straightened up to his martial and imposing stature and got ready to leave. Li Mubai grabbed him to hold him back.

"Big Brother Sun, don't be in such a hurry. I still have to tell you something!"

Sun Zhengli found Li Mubai's strength surprising. He observed his emaciated face and thought, both surprised and admiring: Ultimately, Li Mubai has ability and power, no wonder he manages to defeat Feng Mao, the Golden Sabers of Zhili Province!

Li Mubai asked him to sit down and said:

"At the moment, De Xiaofeng is in prison. Whatever happens, we absolutely have to be patient, especially since Huang Jibei remains cunning and treacherous, and difficult to approach. De Xiaofeng and I are lifelong friends, why don't I go find Huang Jibei to kill him? Dead, he would no longer water those charged with unjustly indicting De Xiaofeng. But it's impossible! Because that would not benefit De Xiaofeng in any way and would certainly even worsen his case!"

Sun Zhengli widened his eyes and retorted:

"You are the friend of the Fifth Lord De, everyone knows that. If you killed Huang Jibei, it would get him into trouble. However, I never met De Xiaofeng. I could face Skinny Buddha Amida, only because I am revolted by this matter. If something goes wrong, no one will be compromised!"

Li Mubai tried to reason with him again:

"Brother Sun, I know you are a brave man. If you are planning to fight against Huang Jibei, I assure you now is not the time. And you shouldn't immediately cut ties with Mao Baokun."

"You can't tell me that," Sun Zhengli said offended. "We are from the same village, Mao Baokun and I used to be together all the time. He was my brother in arms. Subsequently, he continually engaged in malicious acts and I did not want to see him again. I came to Beijing to join him because I saw no other way to make a living, so

I thought I could also meet some of his escort guard friends. I realize that he has fallen very low. I had better rely on my sword and go trekking Jianghu, I will always be able to eat by performing a few performances in the streets."

Li Mubai thought for a moment and said:

"At the Taixing escort agency, the same one where old Yu was guarded when he lived in Beijing, I know Liu Qiyun well, who is also an old acquaintance of Yu Xiongyuan. You should visit him. Tell him that you know me, I'm sure he will offer for you to become one of his guards. In addition, this agency is much more prestigious than that of Sihai. Do not tell Mao Baokun about our meeting yet, as we do not yet know exactly what Huang Jibei and his men are planning, and whether or not they want to set a trap for De Xiaofeng's family. If you heard anything then you could let me know.

"In short, I came back to Beijing to rescue De Xiaofeng. His enemies are everywhere, there is no one to support him. Now, if you want to help me and do all you can to save De Xiaofeng and protect his family, don't say anything just yet. You know. De Xiaofeng and his wife treated young Yu Xiulian very well. If you help me, it's like helping the young lady! We are of course not afraid of Huang Jibei, but we will not fight him to the death just yet, unless he leaves us with no other alternative. We can only contain ourselves and hope that De Xiaofeng's case is resolved. So Li Mubai will be indebted to those who have been benevolent and will ruthlessly avenge his enemies!"

A murderous glow shone in Li Mubai's eyes. It was at this precise moment that Fuzi entered to bring back his precious sword. Li Mubai picked it up and chuckled.

"Big brother Sun, when you introduced yourself, the servants were mistaken and believed that Mao Baokun was sending someone to confront me, that's why I welcomed you with sword in hand. From now on, we're going to have to swallow our anger, but if someone provokes us, we are not going to let it go!"

Sun Zhengli looked up and seemed to think for a moment. He

finally nodded and said:

"Fine, so I'll do as you said. I will temporarily swallow my anger. I'm going to go now."

Li Mubai walked him back to the entrance and then returned to his room. Meeting Sun Zhengli is a good thing. This fellow has an inflexible morality. He could certainly be of great help to me. Li Mubai sat down for a while, then lay down on the bed to rest. His hand hit his bag. He suddenly thought that he should withdraw some money from the passbook to deal with possible unforeseen events. As he rummaged inside the bag, he was surprised to touch something hard. He wondered what it could be and reached out his hand to retrieve an object wrapped in a chi (24) long oiled paper. At the sight of it, Li Mubai felt a deep pain and was stunned.

In this paper was the dagger that Xie Xianniang had hidden in her pillow, for three years, hoping one day for revenge and with which she had finally killed herself. Last winter on a freezing cold night, a misunderstanding arose between her and Li Mubai. As he left the room to leave, Xianniang buried the blade in her chest. Fearing that, in the face of her daughter's suicide, Lady Xie would do the same, Li Mubai took the dagger with him. At the temple, he had found an oiled paper that he had wrapped it in, and then he had wrapped it all up in a tunic. When he returned home, he had forgotten her then.

After Shi the Fat visited Nangong, he left in a hurry, accidentally keeping the dagger - he only noticed it now. Li Mubai thought back to his blind feelings towards Xianniang, then to the disarray she had plunged him into to finally bring about such a tragic end. Li Mubai sighed in despair. He had to find out where she was buried. He would go there hoping those painful thoughts would finally stop haunting him.

And the dagger? Li Mubai looked at the small package of paper. He didn't have the courage to open it and see the bloodstained blade again. I have to give it up somewhere. What's the use of keeping this thing that rekindles my sorrow? He then placed the bundled weapon under the covers. He then found the account book and asked Fuzi to go to the bank to collect a hundred liang.

Li Mubai was able to rest for a while before Fuzi returned, and his mind calmed down. At dinner time, Qiu Guangchao, the General with the Silver Lance, sent someone to carry a note to the knight. The message went something like this:

"I had gone out earlier to visit a relative and we were unable to meet. You must have been very disappointed. I wanted to come see you but unfortunately my injury is barely recovering and I cannot travel for very long. I am sending you this message, asking you to accept my apologies. The case concerning our big brother De is revolting, but your little brother vouches for him, he doesn't have to worry about his life. I asked for Yang Jian-tang to come to watch over the De family. If he comes, I will be all the more reassured. Pay my respects to the wife of our big brother. If in the future you need anything please let me know right away. We are all close friends of Xiaofeng. We are all devoted to him and will do anything to help him etc."

Li Mubai noted Qiu Guangchao's loyal friendship. Originally, he was not very close to De Xiaofeng, but he was obviously touched by this matter and cared a lot about him. Without delay, Li Mubai brought the letter to Lady De. Reading the note from the young Marquis Qiu, who said he was not worried about her husband's life, reassured her.

Li Mubai then returned to the library. He was not reassured. He dreaded the counterattack of the Feng brothers and Mao Baokun whom he had beaten up recently. He was afraid that Huang Jibei would resort to Zhang Yujin's old process of sending his men in the middle of the night to do the irreparable. So he did not dare to undress or rest. He put on a short set. His precious sword in hand, he made several rounds of inspection in the inner and outer courtyards, in the rooms and on the roofs, and found nothing abnormal.

He smiled inwardly and said to himself: At the prison, De Xiaofeng made me understand that all the thugs and ruffians in the capital feared me, maybe that's true. Since I've been here, no one has come to cause trouble in front of the residence. Huang Jibei has never appeared in public to confront an opponent, he prefers to secretly plot against him. He must know that I am in Beijing and will do



everything to harm me. I'll have to stay on my guard. For now, I have the support of Beile Tie, Qiu Guangchao and Sun Zhengli, and before long, Yang Jiantang will definitely arrive. So I am not alone! Li Mubai went to bed at sunrise. He stayed at the residence all morning and went to the prison to see De Xiaofeng in the afternoon.

When he learned of the events of the day before, De Xiaofeng was worried.

"Brother," he said to him, "you came to the capital for me. For Huang Jibei, it's like a boil growing in the eye, like a splinter that ends up in the flesh! After what you did yesterday, Huang Jibei must strive to find a way to eliminate you because he will not be satisfied until then. You're going to have to be very careful. You should talk about it with the Second Lord Tie and Qiu Guangchao, so that they can help you if needed!"

Li Mubai did not seem convinced by these words, but did not want to argue with De Xiaofeng. He replied:

"Big brother, don't feel like you have to give me recommendations! I know what to do!"

Li Mubai then told him that Qiu Guangchao had sent him a message the night before, saying that he had sent Yang Jiantang to Beijing. De Xiaofeng seemed delighted with this news.

"If he comes, that will give us extra arms. I don't really need him in prison, but you are going to need some solid help on the outside."

De Xiaofeng suddenly had a smiling face.

"By the way, guess what!" he suddenly exclaimed. "Zhang Yujin, the Golden Spear, did not return to Henan. I heard that he was staying in Baoding, with Feng Mao's disciple, a man named Tao Hong, the Black Tiger. Huang Jibei regularly sends someone there to give them gifts and discuss certain projects. It is also said that Wei Fengxiang, The One Who Surpasses Lü Bu, has joined them. Yet he is the man who must hate Huang Jibei the most. Formerly, the latter had asked for help from Qiu Guangchao to confront him. Wei Fengxiang was defeated. In anger, he abandoned his escort agency

and went to settle at Juyong Pass where he engaged in robberies. He essentially plundered the commercial convoys of Huang Jibei which went to the Kouwai, beyond the Great Wall. Their mutual hatred runs deep and I still don't understand why he joined them. It is said that Huang Jibei regularly sends him money and that the two men have reconciled. Decidedly, the men of Jianghu are versatile, it is laughable!"

"What is difficult to understand about this?" Li Mubai replied. "I once injured Wei Fengxiang. So he forgot his old grudges and reconciled to unite with them and oppose me. All of these men have already lost to me and even if they come together I am not afraid of them!"

"Don't talk like that. Whether you fear them or not, it is best to avoid any altercation. A man keeps me informed of rumors, he says he knows you and responds to the nickname of Little Scolopendre. He is a regular on the streets of the capital and has ears everywhere. If you meet him, give him some coins and he will bring you back what he learns about Huang Jibei."

"I do know him. As for finding out about their shenanigans, I can also count on someone else, don't worry!"

Li Mubai told him about the coming of Sun Zhengli, the Eagle of the Five Talons.

De Xiaofeng was glad to hear that Yu Xiulian's father's disciple was in Beijing and offered to help him. He said to himself: If young Yu joined them as well, that would be perfect! She could stay with me and in addition to protecting my family, she could comfort my wife and my mother. De Xiaofeng was careful not to share his thoughts with Li Mubai. He remembered that at the slightest mention of Yu Xiulian, his friend became troubled.

They talked for a while longer, then Delu, sent by the beile Tie, arrived. Li Mubai thought back to the time when he came to see him at the yamen prison almost every day. Last year, Huang Jibei and Fat Lu San played a dirty trick on me, and Beile Tie did all he could to rescue me. If De Xiaofeng hadn't vouched for me, I don't think the beile would have gone to so much trouble for a non-native like me. Today, I am free, it is De Xiaofeng who is in prison and he

and his family are in danger.

Li Mubai suddenly felt sad and anxious. If De Xiaofeng had not been Manchurian, if he had not practiced at court, and if he had neither family nor property in Beijing, Li Mubai would have acted like Shi the Fat, and would certainly have killed Huang Jibei. Immersed in his thoughts, the knight remained silent. Delu and De Xiaofeng chatted for a moment through the bars of the window. Delu then took leave of the two men.

They spoke a little more, then Li Mubai left. On leaving the prison of the Ministry of Punishments, he decided to visit his uncle. The latter, a senior official in this ministry, could certainly help De Xiaofeng. Li Mubai rented a cart, went through the Shunzi gate (25) and went to the Half-South lane. He got out of the cart in front of the Qi family's home and knocked on the door. His uncle's servant, Laisheng, opened the door and greeted him respectfully.

"When did you arrive Lord Li?" he asked.

"I arrived yesterday. Is your master at home?"

"He came back just now. Please, Lord Li, come in!"

Laisheng led him to his uncle and aunt. After discussing their family, Li Mubai brought up the case of De Xiaofeng. Qi Dianchen was very confident.

"You shouldn't worry too much about Fifth Lord De. He is unlikely to be sentenced to death. First, he's just a suspect. He is accused of being the instigator of the Imperial Palace thefts, but there is no evidence against him. In the second place, the beile Tie and the young Marquis Qiu support him. Besides, the Fifth Lord De has always had a good reputation in Beijing and I don't think the yamen treats him badly. Only Huang Jibei purposely attacked him. I don't know how much money he was able to spend with the Grand Steward of the Palace, but he certainly wants him dead."

Li Mubai lost his temper and chuckled coldly. Qi Dianchen continued:

"Everyone thinks that the hatred between De Xiaofeng and Huang Jibei arose because of you, you are going to have to be very careful! Huang Jibei has a long arm and manages to harm a wealthy man by imprisoning him, won't it be even easier for him to attack you? You said it was Fat Lu San who staged a blow against you last year. In fact, Huang Jibei had a lot to do with it as well. All the yamen officials remember your name. Even today, many believe that you committed the murders of Gros Lu San and Lord Xu. If you didn't know the Beile Tie, you certainly couldn't stay even one more day in Beijing. Now that you're back, don't give me any trouble!"

Li Mubai was not very happy with these words, but he did not dare to show his displeasure. He just nodded and insisted again to his uncle that De Xiaofeng be treated well at the Ministry of Punishment.

"You don't have to ask me. In yamen, absolutely no one has bad intentions against him and several officials are known to him. Most consider that despite this history, the Fifth Lord De still belongs to the Courtyard of the Palace. He remains one of their close relations, from a rich family: even if he were condemned, he would always manage to turn around."

Li Mubai was reassured to know that in the ministry no one was hostile to De Xiaofeng. He took leave of his uncle and aunt and left the residence. On the way, he thought to inquire about the place where Xianniang was buried, but he suddenly worried about the De family and preferred to return to the residence without delay. That day, no one showed up and he stayed in the library to rest. In the evening, he kept on his guard again, but nothing abnormal happened.

The next morning, Li Mubai went back to see De Xiaofeng in prison. In the afternoon, he started looking for Little Scolopendre. The latter explained to him:

"I heard several men from Huang Jibei talking in a tea house. Since Huang Jibei has heard of your coming, he never leaves his home. The fact that you beat up the Feng brothers in the middle of the street and tore up the IOU made him irascible. He would have personally said that he was no longer dealing with De's case, but

exclusively yours! He now has the Feng brothers, Mao Baokun, and a newly arrived Beijing escort guard, a man named Sun Zhengli, on hand. He also sent to Zhuo Prefecture, the tyrant Liu Qi, and Baoding, Tao Hong, the Black Tiger, who is accompanied by Zhang Yujin, the Golden Spear, and his men. In less than two weeks, they'll all be here. Huang Jibei now trains daily with his hook swords and prepares for a fight to the death against you."

"Very well!" Li Mubai proudly exclaimed. "I am waiting for them!"

Li Mubai handed a few coins to Little Scolopendre.

He now knew that Huang Jibei was preparing to face him. Li Mubai was really amused that he had invited a whole gang and practiced every day with his pair of hook swords. He calculated: Huang Jibei is treacherous and devious in the extreme. He's certainly spreading this rumor intentionally so that I'm only concerned with their coming and the fight. In reality, he must negotiate in secret to have me arrested by the court! I'll have to be really, really careful!

That day, Sun Zhengli came to visit Li Mubai. He informed him that Huang Jibei had sent several men to seek allies. The knight always replied proudly as he did not fear them at all. Sun Zhengli assured him that when the time came, he would help him fight them. Li Mubai was very grateful and accepted his help. After Sun Zhengli left, he did not come out. Nothing special happened at the residence, the day passed quietly.

The next day, feeling reassured about the De family, Li Mubai decided to go to Xianniang's grave. He was convinced that he could chase away the memories that haunted him. He took care to take the dagger with which she had ended her life. He first went to the prison to see De Xiaofeng, then walked past the Qianmen Gate to the Liuli Pink House District.

As he entered the alley, a painful sensation filled his heart. He thought back to his visits to the sick Xianniang, and especially to the night when she had committed suicide and during which he had returned to the temple alone, trampling the snow. This sight was a real nightmare. His cart pulled up to the Xie family gate. A man stood at the entrance and sold oil. It was Yu Er.

When he saw Li Mubai, he hastened to greet him.

"Lord Li," he exclaimed, "it has been a while since we last saw you. Did you leave Beijing? When did you come back?"

Li Mubai told the driver to stop but did not get out of the car.

"Does Xianniang's mother still live here?" he asked then.

"She left us, she died at the end of the year. I took care of the burial. Her grave is in the cemetery of the poor in the lowlands to the south of the city, right next to her daughter's."

Li Mubai sighed upon hearing this sad news. He asked him:

"Do you have time for me now? Could you take me to Xianniang's grave, I would like to burn paper money there!"

"Alright Alright! I have absolutely nothing to do, I'll take you there!"

Yu Er gave his bottles of oil to a neighborhood child to take them home. Without even changing, he got onto the cart and told the driver to head south. They forked out of the alley and headed south down the avenue that begins at Shunzi Gate to the vast uninhabited areas known as the lowlands. We were in the first decade of the third lunar month, the plum and peach trees were already in bloom, the willows were green, the weeds completely covered the ground with a soft carpet. The tombs there were innumerable. The west wind was blowing, sweeping the land away, and from this expanse emanated an atmosphere of sadness. Li Mubai sighed continuously. Yu Er asked him for news of young Yu Xiulian and inquired about De Xiaofeng's affair, but Li Mubai did not answer him. They arrived in front of a hamlet. Li Mubai begged Yu Er to buy him several piles of paper money to burn from the local stall. The latter did so then got back in the cart and they continued east.

Soon after, they reached the southern lowlands. There was nothing around except countless hollows and dilapidated tombs, where the planks of the coffins sometimes even appeared. Yu Er jumped out of the cart and exclaimed:

"It's here!"

Li Mubai also got out of the vehicle. In front of these abandoned tombs, he frowned and asked:

"So nobody takes care of all these graves?"

"Who would take care of it? This is the cemetery of the poor here, all these graves have no name. These are all those of prostitutes who have earned their living somehow. In their lifetime, they all wore silk and satin, they were all coated with powder and blush, they were all adorned with gold and silver. The regular customers came to see them several days in a row, they accompanied them to banquets, they played and sang for them - some of these prostitutes were even much prettier and much more fashionable than Xianniang! But once they are dead, there is no one left to care about them! It still happens that the owner of the establishment buys four boards for the coffin, pays two men to bring it here, dig a hole and bury it, and that's it. After several days, the raging wind will have carried with it the earth from above the grave and the corpse will be dug up by the dogs. They have no parents, no blood connection with anyone, who could care about their gaunt remains?"

"You see all these graves, they've only been there for a maximum of two years, but they were all cleared very quickly. If not, why would one say of prostitutes that their beauty is their misfortune? Lord Li, have you never heard them sing their long laments? They also say that we remove their corpses without bothering to bury them! What beautiful black hair and delicate little feet..."

Yu Er suddenly sang one of those sad, plaintive tunes to Li Mubai. Despite his iron stature and knight's heart, Li Mubai couldn't restrain his feelings and sobbed bitterly. He was not crying especially for Xie Xianniang, but for all those brilliant women who had had no luck in this world. He was almost thirty years old and still not married: he suddenly thought of going to find one of them and marry her. For him, these women had all been destroyed by society! The yellow earth had buried them! His tears flowed to the floor.

Li Mubai followed Yu Er to the cemetery. He counted "one, two, three, four..." to seven and exclaimed:

"Lord Li, come on, here is Cuixian's tomb! And next to that, Lady Xie."

Li Mubai approached the grave covered with tender grass, where an orchid of the third lunar month had already bloomed, as if the blade of Xianniang had reincarnated in this wild flower.

Li Mubai then thought back to his meeting with Xianniang, to that summer when he had visited this courtesan in the company of De Xiaofeng, to that unforgettable impression in the midst of all these decorated lanterns, which was to accompany him forever. He also remembered the night he threw up on Xianniang's bed and the night he discovered the dagger hidden in her pillow. He remembered that rainy night, when she had kept him near him and where among the bursts of laughter and the vapors of incense, they had exchanged their tender feelings. Subsequently, she got married to Assistant Minister Xu. He had gone to see her in the middle of the night and she had been cold and distant with him. He finally saw her lying down and sick, brutalized by Miao Zhenshan and then dead after being stabbed.

He suddenly realized that Xianniang had fallen in love with him from the start. She had been afraid that he was in fact just a Jianghu bandit - she had changed her behavior and her mind by then. It wasn't until Miao Zhenshan died that she realized he wasn't that kind of man. Even exhausted, her feelings for him persisted and she hoped he could love her. At that time, he was tormented by the stories of Meng Sizhao and Yu Xiulian, and no longer wanted to stay in Beijing. He had told her that he would probably never see her again and Xianniang, losing all hope, had turned the dagger against herself.

Who should we ultimately blame for this tragic outcome? he wondered. Certainly not her, who remained courageous and sensitive, nor to me, who never deviated from perfect sincerity. One can only blame fate, with its accumulated errors and its life's misfortunes. We both had an unhappy fate and suffered the harassment of others, yet we never managed to understand each other. The curse has followed us throughout this life and this deep affection has turned into disaster!



Li Mubai, while wiping away his tears, begged Yu Er to separate the wads of counterfeit money and burn them. Li Mubai watched the flames consume the papers. He squeezed his chest in grief and suddenly felt the dagger under his fingers. He was paralyzed for a moment. He did not take out the weapon, but some money which he gave to Yu Er, saying to him:

"Last year, the Xianniang affair must have given you some concern. At that time, I wanted to thank you for what you had done, but having left the capital in a hurry, I had not been able to do it. I offer you this modest sum to thank you in place of the deceased. Later, when you have time, could you come back to Xianniang's grave and add some more soil to it and make sure that her skeleton is not dug up?"

Yu Er accepted the money and thanked him with a respectful bow.

"Lord Li, rest easy! At each party, I will come and take care of Cuixian's tomb. I will not leave it abandoned as "young women sing it in their laments!"

Yu Er was going to continue, but Li Mubai waved him back and begged him to leave. The cart stayed there and Li Mubai headed south on his own.

He walked a little more than a li and found himself facing a vast pond bordered by reeds. They had grown in small clusters, like needles that appeared on the surface of the water. Li Mubai stood for a moment by the pond. He made sure there was no one around, then pulled out the dagger and threw it as far as he could. He saw the water splash and turned around, not even turning his head. He returned to the cart and begged the driver to take him to De Xiaofeng's residence without delay.

During the journey, Li Mubai felt as if he had regained his wits and vigor. He no longer felt that sorrow and sadness that had accompanied him before. As if he were rid of his obsession with Xianniang, he focused on ways to save De Xiaofeng and counter Huang Jibei. The driver of course did not suspect all of this and only noted that Li Mubai was in a hurry.

The vehicle passed Qianmen Gate and crossed Chang'an Avenue. Li Mubai was coming soon. He was light-hearted, as if all his sentimental problems had finally been solved. All that remained for him to do was to pay back the friendship De Xiaofeng bore him and settle his duel with Huang Jibei. As he crossed the Dongsì pailou, the sound of a horse running at high speed echoed behind the carriage and in a clear and delicate voice the rider exclaimed:

"Li Mubai! Big brother Li!"

## Chapter 32

*On her mount, the graceful and delicate emulate*

*Speak warmly and forget past resentment;*

*He attacks head-on with his spear and dodges stealthily fired arrows,*

*The treacherous ambush occurs at dusk.*

Li Mubai wondered who was calling him. He stopped the vehicle, turned to look back, and did indeed see a horse coming towards him. A young woman was riding it. She wore a black handkerchief on her head, as well as a short black ensemble. She wore little arched shoes inserted in red copper stirrups. Her beautiful cheekbones and pretty eyes were slightly marked by the fatigue of the journey. Her face, body, and all her belongings - a pair of sabers strapped under the saddle and a small sack above - were covered in dust and dirt. The rider was none other than Yu Xiulian from Julu.

Li Mubai felt surprised, ashamed and heartbroken all at the same time. Surprised, because he wondered the reasons for her coming to Beijing. It seemed obvious that she was just passing through the gates of the city. Ashamed, because last winter, on a freezing cold morning, Xiulian had chased him. Her horse had slipped in the snow and she had fallen. Confused and discontented, she then wanted to draw her sabers to fight against him. Now face to face, what attitude should he adopt with her? Sorrowful, because he knew that in Julu, she sadly spent her days in solitude.

Xiulian's pretty cheekbones were slightly red, showing a slight embarrassment. She held back the bridle of her mount and addressed Li Mubai:

"I didn't know my older brother Li had returned to Beijing. If I had known, I might not have hurried to come so quickly. How is Fifth Big Brother De doing?"

Li Mubai understood that having heard about De Xiaofeng's case and his arrest, she had rushed to Beijing. It must have been a shot

from Shi the Fat, Li Mubai thought. That evening, as it was drizzling with light rain, he came to pick me up in Nangong, then our paths parted. He had most certainly gone to warn young Yu in Julu. Now that she's in Beijing, it's also good. She will be able to protect the De family, and will always be a better fit than me. Yu Xiulian has a rather brash temperament. On her first visit to the capital, she killed Miao Zhenshan, the Fish that swallowed up the Ships. This time, if she is here, it is because Shi reported to her that Huang Jibei was doing everything to harm De Xiaofeng. She must have walked with her heart full of rage and indignation. It seems inevitable that it will again cause some incident in Beijing. Then, not only will she not be able to protect the De family anymore, but will harm De Xiaofeng. Li Mubai did not wish to discuss at length with Xiulian, but it still seemed impossible to him to escape it. He made the cart move slowly.

Yu Xiulian followed him on horseback as he explained the whole affair to her in detail. He then urged her to contain her rage and especially not to create an incident.

"Whatever anger you harbor deep inside is going to have to be brought under control temporarily. Let's wait until our big brother De's case is finally settled before we go find Huang Jibei and his men!"

Li Mubai seemed to implore Xiulian not to attempt anything, believing that she couldn't control herself like him. He feared that she would deploy her talents in this matter.

Against all odds, Xiulian listened to him without showing the slightest sign of indignation or suppressed anger, content to hold back her horse's bridle to keep pace with the cart. She even sighed slightly and finally said:

"Big brother Li, I no longer have the character of my old days. Last year, I was still just a child. The day I chased you through the snow and my horse slipped, I got mad at you, and regretted it very much afterwards. I remembered the words my father said to me before he died in Yushu Township. He asked me, in your presence, to consider you as my big brother!"

Xiulian, on her horse, began to cry in the middle of the street. Li Mubai lowered his head, sad and confused.

"Subsequently," she continued, "I learned of Meng Sizhao's death and I was totally devastated. I returned home and never left the house. You were in Nangong, which is not very far from Julu, but I did not come to see you to apologize to you. My heart was constantly grieved by it. Last month, Liu Qing and escort guards from Xuanhua brought my parents' coffins back to Julu. Everything went well, but I didn't let you know either.

"I thought I would be in mourning for three years. I would then have come to thank you for your kindness to my family and then I would have gone to thank De Xiaofeng and his wife for their kindness to me. However, little more than ten days after my parents' funeral in Julu, Shi the Fat arrived from the capital. If you weren't here, today I would certainly have tried to save De Xiaofeng, finding a somewhat rash way as quickly as possible to get him out of prison. But since you're here, I don't take care of it anymore. The best thing is that I move in with the De family to protect De Xiaofeng's mother, wife and children, without even leaving the residence. I do not think of going to the prison to see my big brother De and I ask you to inform him of my arrival and to reassure him!"

Li Mubai was listening to Xiulian. Her words, clear and frank, implied that she respected and esteemed him. What about him towards her? At first, when he learned that she was promised to the Meng family and therefore could not marry him, all his hopes were dashed. His feelings constantly harassed him, to the point of creating doubt in Meng Sizhao's mind. After his tragic death, the life of young Yu must have been very painful! Thinking about it, Li Mubai thought to himself that he was the cause of Xiulian's sad plight and felt deep shame and regret. He observed Xiulian who held the reins of her horse and whipped it. Her graceful manners clearly hinted at a heroic soul. He felt admiration and esteem for the young woman. He thought back to old guard Yu's funeral. In accordance with his last wishes, Li Mubai had escorted Xiulian and her mother to Xuanhua. The two women had ridden in the cart, he on horseback - now it was he who found himself in a cart and

Xiulian who followed him with her mount. Past and present were reversed. In one year, everything had changed so quickly!

Faced with the martial presence of the rider, Li Mubai found himself in comparison quite bland, sitting in the cart, looking utterly dejected. He considered it illusory to be considered a hero, he who was not up to this young woman. If he had immediately seen her in the middle of the street, he certainly wouldn't have had the courage to wave at her. She called him as soon as she saw him and even explained to him the misunderstanding that had arisen last winter. It seemed clear that the Jianghu hero that he was was not worth her! Li Mubai therefore tried to pull himself together, adopt an upright attitude, and tried not to have any feelings towards her anymore.

Li Mubai informed her of the presence in the capital of Sun Zhengli, the Eagle of the Five Talons. The young woman seemed quite delighted.

"My brother in arms Sun is here! I absolutely must meet him!"

"He will certainly visit me during the day, then you can see him. What about Fat Shi?"

"Shi had come to find me. Yu Tianjie, the Golden Darts, the disciple of one of my father's brothers in arms, had come from Henan to help us organize my parents' funeral. After the funeral, he had not yet left when Shi arrived. As it turns out, these two have known each other for a long time. On the day of my departure, they had decided to stay in Julu for a while longer. Shi told me that he would meet me later in Beijing."

"If he comes," replied Li Mubai, "he will certainly not dare to go through the gates of the capital with a calm mind!"

"How so?" Xiulian asked, surprised by this remark.

Li Mubai could not tell her anything because they were already entering Santiao Lane. They stopped in front of the residence and Li Mubai knocked on the front door. Shou'er came shortly after to open the door to them. He was pleasantly surprised to see Xiulian.

"Young Yu also came," he said, greeting her respectfully. "Our mistress has thought about you a lot!"

Xiulian dismounted and entered. She walked along the corridor and went straight to Lady De's apartments. Shou'er paid the cost of the ride for Li Mubai, then called a servant to lead Xiulian's mount to the stables. After having recovered the sabers and the belongings of the young woman, he left to go about his business.

Li Mubai returned to the library to rest. He felt happy again. His feelings for Xie Xianniang no longer tormented him and it seemed like he would never think about it again. Yu Xiulian would now live at the residence and look after the De family in his stead. He would be able to devote himself to the two most urgent matters in his eyes: saving De Xiaofeng and thwarting Huang Jibei's plans. Sun Zhengli did not visit him that day. The next day, Li Mubai sent Fuzi to beg him to come so that he could meet Yu Xiulian.

The knight went to the prison to see his friend and inform him of the arrival of the young woman. De Xiaofeng was delighted. She would protect his family, a task that seemed more suited to her than to Li Mubai, and at the same time she could comfort his wife. He feared some unwelcome deviations from young Yu, however, and he was relieved to hear Li Mubai's comments about improving her character. Yu Xiulian pledged to look after his family and not deal with other outside issues. De Xiaofeng, reassured, begged his friend to thank her.

After leaving the prison, Li Mubai went to Qiu Guang-chao's home, then to the beile Tie. When they learned of Xiulian's presence, they instructed Li Mubai to reason with her so that she would not cause an incident. De Xiaofeng's case was about to be settled and it was important not to have an unforeseen event create new complications.

Upon returning to the residence, Li Mubai found it unnecessary to speak with Xiulian. As she had told him, she spent her days with Lady De chatting and comforting her. In the evening, she recovered her sabers and carried out several tours of inspection throughout the house. She was content to carry out these tasks and never left the residence. Li Mubai was therefore fully reassured. As for him, he

busied himself for De Xiaofeng and discreetly inquired about the process Huang Jibei intended to use to oppose him.

More than a month passed thus. De Xiaofeng's case had been reviewed and a judgment was about to be handed down. Yang Jiantang, the Divine Lance, had arrived in Beijing and was residing with Qiu Guangchao. Only Huang Jibei no longer gave any sign of life. He never left his house and seemed to have no contact with Zhang Yujin, Tao Hong, and the tyrant Liu Qi - no doubt he was trying to avoid having to confront Li Mubai. The Feng brothers and Mao Baokun, remained hidden in their escort agency and did not dare to show themselves since they had been beaten.

Since those three weren't coming to challenge him, the knight didn't care about them. As for Huang Jibei, for whom he harbored a deep hatred, Li Mubai could soon make him pay for his crimes and settle his score. Sun Zhengli, however, had to avoid quarreling with Huang Jibei and his men if he wanted to help him, but his feet and fists itched. He often wanted to confront Lean Buddha Amida, but Li Mubai would prevent him from doing so. He found it very difficult to contain his anger and indignation. He then vented against his brother-in-arms Mao Baokun who had always been afraid of him and did nothing to provoke him. He could only use soothing words to reason with him.

Several more days passed thus. Spring gave way to hot summer days. The year before, around the same time, Li Mubai had just arrived and was wandering around the capital. He was then in a rather indifferent mood, although he sometimes felt just indignation which he was careful not to express. His health was not bad but he was losing weight visibly. He quickly realized that his affliction was not the only cause and that he had contracted an illness when he was released from prison. Meng Sizhao had taken care of him. He had recovered, but the source of the evil had not disappeared. He could not fully recover, shaken and grieved by the deaths of Meng Sizhao and Xie Xianni. Now that De Xiaofeng was behind bars and Huang Jibei was plotting against him, all his worries, his torments and his anger were piling up deep inside him. If it continues like this, I will find myself in bed. I will then no longer be able to take care of De Xiaofeng or even take revenge on Huang



Jibei! Li Mubai therefore decided to take care of his health. He was making his daily visit to the prison. He would then go to the beile Tie to ask for his help in this matter, then to his uncle to hear from him. After his daily chores, he never came out of the De family's residence and spent the rest of his time resting.

One afternoon, while Li Mubai was taking a nap in his room, Shou'er, looking gleeful, suddenly woke him up.

"Lord Li, your uncle Qi has just sent a servant to deliver the verdict of our master's judgment to us."

Li Mubai straightened up, full of enthusiasm.

"Quickly bring in Laisheng!"

Laisheng, who was waiting under the corridor, entered the room without delay. He respectfully greeted Li Mubai and said:

"Lord Li, my master just returned from the ministry and immediately sent me to tell you that the Fifth Lord De was soon to be convicted. In a day or two, public affairs will confirm the sanction."

"What is he convicted of?" Li Mubai asked hurriedly.

"The charge against De Xiaofeng is the lightest of the whole case. Two Palace eunuchs and an Imperial Guard will be beheaded in the fall, and Yang Junru will remain in prison. Only an imperial guard by the name of Bai and the Fifth Lord De will be banished and sent to Xinjiang (26)."

Li Mubai couldn't hold back his tears. De Xiaofeng had certainly avoided the death penalty, but how could he endure this banishment in Xinjiang, a poor and remote place? The fact of being separated from his wife and children would be unbearable for him! Laisheng tried to comfort him:

"The Fifth Lord De belongs to the Inner Court, he surely won't be roughed up there. My teacher says that his sending to Xinjiang will be comparable to one of his missions. It will certainly not be as comfortable as in Beijing, but if he has the money, he will not be

brutalized. In a year or two, at most, he will be able to enlist the help of an influential person to return to the capital."

Li Mubai nodded and asked:

"After the verdict, did my dear uncle say how long the accused had to leave the capital?"

"It'll be pretty quick! The verdict rendered, he will probably have to leave in the following month. Lord Li, reassure the Fifth Lord De. Traveling in the middle of summer is tiring, but not as tiring as staying in prison!"

Li Mubai nodded. He handed some money to Laisheng who then took his leave. Although the news seemed well founded, did he have to inform Lady De about it? If he revealed to her that her husband was sent to this remote land, he did not know what her reaction would be. On the other hand, if she learned that her husband was no longer facing the death penalty, would she not be reassured at last? Li Mubai thinks for a long time. He finally found it best to warn Lady De and took charge of her rooms.

Xiulian was at his side. Li Mubai informed them of the coming of his uncle's servant. The judgment of Lord De was soon to be rendered. The death penalty was ruled out, but he would be banished to a military garrison in Xinjiang. The servant had said that he would not be brutalized there and that it was better to go on a long journey than to spend the summer in the cells of the prison.

Naturally, Lady De burst into tears when she heard that her husband was being sent to the border, but she recovered thinking that he had avoided the death penalty. By paying a few sums to seek the help of an important personality, he would be back in a few years. Dame De wiped her eyes and said:

"It is good that way, he will avoid Huang Jibei in this way. Only, as soon as he has left us, people will not be long in coming to bully us!"

"Don't worry about it, big sister," Xiulian exclaimed. "As long as my big brother De does not return home, I will not leave this house. I

don't care who comes to pick up a quarrel, I'm not afraid of anyone!"

"Don't worry, sister-in-law," insisted Li Mubai. "As long as young Yu is by your side, you will have nothing to fear."

Li Mubai left them and went to the forecourt to tell Fuzi to prepare a cart. To begin with, he went to see De Xiaofeng. Li Mubai informs him of Laisheng's visit. He expected his friend to be disheartened to learn of his exile in Xinjiang, abandoning his wife and children for these frozen lands. Li Mubai felt very sorry.

Against all expectations, De Xiaofeng did not seem at all distressed by this news. He even sported a smiling face.

"But it's wonderful!" he exclaimed. "It gives me the opportunity to go to Xinjiang. To be honest with you, little brother, know that the Manchus have to deal with taxes daily and can never travel anywhere they want, the law does not allow them to leave Beijing without permission. Nine out of ten Manchus have never passed through the gates of the capital. I have sometimes been sent on a mission outside of Beijing, but I actually went only to Rehe, and never beyond the regions of Dongling (27) or Xiling (28). Last year, for example, you returned home to Nangong, whether it was close or not, I could not have come to see you. Didn't you say that I was banished to Xinjiang? The further away, the better. I will be able to leave Zhili province (29), pass Shanxi, cross Tong pass (30), cross the government of Xi'an (31), reach the surroundings of Yiliang, to finally arrive in Xinjiang. I will travel through so many sites and thus visit Taiyuan Government (32), Huang He, Mount Hua (33), Qilian Mountains (34), Great Wall, Yumen Pass (35). I will enrich myself with experiences and make even more friends, it's so wonderful! I also know that I don't have to worry about my loved ones. Brother, do not delay your career for my family, Yu Xiulian will take care of it and it will be more than enough. Even spending a hundred thousand liang, I couldn't find a better bodyguard than young Yu. It is because I have always been of a social character that this can all come about. Brother, don't worry about me anymore and give me your congratulations! I will be staying in Xinjiang for two or three years, and then we will meet again. Hey! Then you will see how happy we will be!"

Through the iron bars, De Xiaofeng happily laughed. Seeing him like that, Li Mubai also smiled. He didn't force himself: he sincerely admired De Xiaofeng, whom he found so much more enthusiastic and open-minded than himself. They exchanged a few more words, then De Xiaofeng begged Li Mubai to warn Qiu Guangchao and the beile Tie of his banishment in order to reassure them. He did so and took his leave. He left the prison of the Ministry of Punishment, got back in the car, and Fuzi drove him to Qiu Guangchao's residence in Beigouyan.

Li Mubai met the young Marquis Qiu and Yang Jiantang. He told them that the verdict of the judgment was exile in Xinjiang. He specified that this news had in no way tormented De Xiaofeng, who had greeted him with joy.

"Xiaofeng has always taken things on the bright side," Qiu Guangchao remarked. "He has someone to look after his family, he is young and he can go traveling, which is good. But he's going to have to be very careful on the journey. I know that Huang Jibei knows many robbers in Jianghu. They will wait for him in ambush to kill him. We must not rely only on the official escort, one of us will have to accompany him to protect him."

Li Mubai was amazed at this speech. While he was going to answer for himself to accompany De Xiaofeng, he suddenly found it wiser to wait until the latter left Beijing, in order to finally be able to satisfy his revenge against Huang Jibei! Yang Jiantang preceded him, full of elation.

"I will accompany him to Xinjiang. In summer, my agency is not overloaded with missions, some of my guards will be able to take care of them. So I will go for a walk in the company of my brother. If anything happens, I'll be able to deal with it. As soon as I get him there, I'll be back. At the most, it will be in the fall."

Li Mubai was reassured to know that Yang Jiantang agreed to do this.

"If the Third Lord Yang accompanies the Fifth Lord De," he said, "I'm sure nothing will happen on the journey. But this remains a heavy responsibility!"

"But no, but no!" Yang Jiantang replied. Guangchao knows that my friendship with Xiaofeng is recent, but I must help him in this circumstance. I am an escort guard and long journeys do not impress me."

"Jiantang will therefore accompany Xiaofeng," concludes Qiu Guangchao. "We couldn't have hoped for better! You have a lot of knowledge: wherever you go, you will always be treated well."

It was therefore agreed that he would escort all the way from Xiaofeng to Xinjiang. Yang Jiantang, the Divine Lance, was an expert in martial arts and his reputation in Jianghu was well established. For Li Mubai, if he did find himself facing a band of bandits, he was left alone and his forces would not be enough. That's why he suddenly thought of Sun Zhengli.

"I have a friend," he said, "nicknamed the Eagle of the Five Talons, a disciple of old guard Yu de Julu. He is very strong, gifted in martial arts, and of a valiant and loyal temperament. He is currently staying at the Sihai escort agency, but has wanted to leave since he learned what wrongdoing Mao Baokun had committed. If De Xiaofeng has to leave the capital, he could be part of the convoy and lend a hand to Third Lord Yang."

"It's a good idea," replied Yang Jiantang. "A disciple of old guard Yu, the Iron Winged Eagle, must not be bad at martial arts. Tell him to come see me, Brother Li."

The three men chatted for a while, then Li Mubai left them. He got back in the cart and Fuzi drove him to Anding Gate, to Beile Tie's residence. Li Mubai didn't have time to tell anything before the beile asked happily:

"Mubai, do you know that Xiaofeng's verdict will be delivered soon?"

"Yes," he nodded, "I heard that he is going to be banished to a garrison in Xinjiang. De Xiaofeng seems, in fact, quite delighted with this news."

Young beile Tie nodded in turn and explained:

"I wanted to send Xiaofeng for a walk! I was worried that something would happen if he stayed in the capital. Xiaofeng is way too enthusiastic about his friends, and he is sorely lacking in experience. Take, for example, an important figure in this affair, Yang Junru. He's just a profiteering merchant and the two became friends only because they spent their time together hanging out in brothels. If he hadn't decided to rescue him, De Xiaofeng certainly wouldn't have found himself in such a situation!"

Li Mubai did not really understand the chivalrous vision and enthusiasm that the beile showed for De Xiaofeng. The young beile continued:

"This time, Xiaofeng will be able to get tough; enduring some hardship will be beneficial! However, someone would have to accompany him to protect him. I think no matter how daring they are, no robber will dare storm an official convoy. But Xiaofeng has made many enemies recently, like this Zhang Yujin and his gang. If they attack him on the way, their intention will be to kill him."

"We have thought about this possibility. I was just at Qiu Guangchao and we discussed this problem. Yang Jiantang, the Divine Lance, will therefore accompany him, supported by Sun Zhengli, a disciple of the father of young Yu Xiulian."

The beile Tie lifted his head and thought for a moment.

"If Yang Jiantang can escort him and protect him the whole way, that is definitely fine. But if it was you who could take care of it, we would be all the more reassured."

Li Mubai was silent, then sighed:

"I can't go with my big brother De. He always treated me very well and I should do everything for him. But I have another business to settle and I'm afraid I won't be able to escort him at that time!"

"Mubai," replied the beile, with a half smile, "I can guess what you are up to. Now that the judgment is going to be rendered, you will wait for Xiaofeng to leave the capital to attack Huang Jibei. You're going to want to fight him to the death, aren't you?"

Li Mubai inevitably blushed at the beile's insight, yet he dared not recognize anything. He forced himself to smile and exclaimed:

"But no, but no! Why would I go to all this trouble to counter Huang Jibei? And why should I wait for Xiaofeng to leave the capital?"

The beile still had his little smile on his face and replied:

"No need to argue, I know everything. You have contained your anger so far. You decided on your own to wait for the verdict of the judgment to be handed down before facing Huang Jibei. He spends his days training with his hook swords and prepares for battle. I also know that the hatred that binds you both is irremediable. Huang Jibei has behaved indecently lately, and I sincerely hope that a man like you will teach him a lesson. But you will not find your future there. You are young and full of promise. What kind of man is Huang Jibei? He only relies on his money. I advise you to swallow your anger a little more for this kind of trifle and instead focus on your promising career."

Li Mubai was very touched and thought to himself that the beile really appreciated him. It was not their dispute that made him fight, but until Huang Jibei was eliminated, De Xiaofeng would never live in peace. And if, in Beijing, this crime went unpunished, how many other people was Huang Jibei going to attack afterwards? Li Mubai thought about it and didn't answer anything.

The two men chatted for a while longer, then Li Mubai wanted to take his leave. But the beile held him back:

"I've wanted to give a reception to celebrate your return for a long time. But with De Xiaofeng's case, we weren't in the mood for it. Now everything is settled and Xiaofeng's problems are definitely taken care of. I'll have some alcohol brewed and we'll continue talking at our leisure, but don't take this as a feast. I will organize the feast when Xiaofeng returns to Beijing in a year or two. Some of us will then be gathered around a sumptuous banquet for a joyous celebration!"

Beile Tie begged him to stay with such kindness that it would have

been inappropriate to leave. The knight therefore sat down. Thinking about the beile's phrase, "Let's wait a year or two for Xiaofeng to return," Li Mubai was overcome with emotion. He thought: The first time I left home, I lived in Beijing for almost a year, and the changes have been countless and rapid. If a year or two goes by again, it's hard to predict how things will turn out! Li Mubai sighed inwardly.

Beile Tie and the Chevalier argued for a long time. The beile then begged him to wait for him while he went to his private apartments. He returned after a while with a servant holding two precious swords wrapped in a red satin cloth. The beile uncovered them to show them to Li Mubai and said:

"These two precious swords, passed down from generation to generation in my family, belonged to famous generals of antiquity. I like to point out what are real rarities on earth. They are much more remarkable than the one I gave you last year."

A delighted smile crossed the beile's face. Li Mubai gazed with attention and admiration at the two swords. He looked at the deep blue green blades. Seven gold stars were encrusted there, which represented the constellation Ursa Major (36). They were truly famous weapons, priceless treasures. Li Mubai lowered his head and suddenly felt a dull sadness. The evocation of the sword the beile had given him reminded him that he had met Meng Sizhao thanks to it. The sword now rested beside this great knight, who died so tragically. The beile noticed the young man's worried expression and understood that he was thinking about his friend again. He then begged the servant to take the arms back to his chambers and asked Delu to bring them the banquet. Quickly, three cooks left alcohol and tea. The beile drank and chatted at leisure with Li Mubai. They brought up De Xiaofeng's case and then talked about Li Mubai's future.

"Mubai," the beile told him, "if you don't accompany Xiaofeng to Xinjiang, you can come and live here. I will provide you with two hundred liang of silver, I think that will be more than enough for your expenses. I will not ask you to keep the residence, and I will always treat you as my guest. I will be happy to see you more often and may sometimes ask you for advice on martial arts."



Li Mubai was of course very grateful for the words of the beile, but replied:

"The beile treats me with great kindness; all my life, I would be grateful to him. De Xiaofeng will be escorted to Xinjiang by Yang Jiantang and Sun Zhengli, and I am confident that nothing will happen to them. For the protection of the De family, Yu Xiulian will take care of it and stay at the residence, so I don't worry about this. I now thought I would wait for De Xiaofeng to leave the capital to go to Jiangnan, to visit my uncle by marriage, Jiang Nanhe. When I return to Beijing, I will then be able to settle in the honorable home of the Second Lord!"

"The famous knight errant Jiang Nanhe was, for more than ten years, the one and only hero in the south of Changjiang (37). I had the honor of knowing his name, but I never heard that he had ventured into the northern regions. This dear knight must now be of an advanced age and it is not certain that he is still alive. If you go to Jiangnan, I'm afraid you won't meet him."

"When I was eight years old, my parents died of an epidemic. Jiang Nanhe was my father's sworn brother, Fengjie, and he took care of their funeral. He led me north to entrust me to my uncle in charge of raising me, and the knight then resumed his journey.

Subsequently, my late teacher Ji Guangjie moved to Nangong to recruit disciples. He had, in fact, been commissioned by his old friend Jiang Nanhe to transmit his art to me. My parents gave birth to me, but mostly my uncle Jiang Nanhe took care of and educated me. Since our separation, almost twenty years have passed. If I meet him, I'm afraid I won't be able to recognize him. I want to go to Jiangnan to find him, but also to visit the famous sites of this region."

Li Mubai spoke like this but was still grieved. He said to himself: I always wanted to go to Jiangnan, but I had no money for the trip. Now that I have it, thanks to De Xiaofeng's help, my feelings are tugging at me and I am unable to settle accounts with my friends and enemies. My life remains far too unpredictable and getting there seems impossible to me!"

The beile twisted his mustache as he stared at him. He seemed

immersed in deep thoughts. He finally nodded:

"Very well! Going to Jiangnan will enrich you with many experiences. I will wait for your return and you will come to live with me."

The beile then raised his glass and invited Li Mubai to drink. He was somewhat upset, not because the knight had politely declined his offer, but because he found his reasons unconvincing.

That day, the beile was talkative and the alcohol flowed in abundance. Li Mubai, who was to protect De Xiaofeng and stand up to Huang Jibei, dared not abuse it. They argued for a while longer, and when the food and drinks were half consumed, the knight took his leave.

Candles and lamps had been lit in the rooms. The sky was getting darker and darker and the purple clouds of the setting sun had practically disappeared. When he left the residence, Li Mubai approached the cart but did not see Fuzi anywhere. The servants of the residence exclaimed:

"Lord Li, your driver has gone to eat."

Li Mubai smiled and told himself that Fuzi had waited a long time for him and that he must be starving. So he waited near the cart. Soon after, Fuzi reappeared.

"Lord Li, you must be upset! I had gone to eat in a small stall in the east."

"I'm not at all upset," smiles Li Mubai. "I'm the one who made you wait a long time, I'm sorry!"

"Come on, Lord Li, don't apologize! Since when do drivers fear to wait? In the past, when my master went to stroll in brothels, he did not come out until well after midnight: how could I have even grumbled?"

Fuzi then gave a perky little laugh. He arranged the cushion on the seat and begged Li Mubai to get into the cart. At Fuzi's remark, Li Mubai remembered last summer. He had barely arrived from

Xuanhua. He could not find a job and stayed at an inn in the Xiheyang district. One evening, while strolling through the alleys, his footsteps had taken him to the pleasure district and there he had met De Xiaofeng, led by Fuzi. From that night on, their friendship had only grown. They often went to this area, and this is how the tragedy with Xie Xianniang happened. Li Mubai, sitting in the cart, began to sigh for a long time.

To move forward, Fuzi threw big interjections at the animal, such as "ho! ho! Hey! Hey!" The path was rough and the wheels squeaked with a throbbing sound. Li Mubai was deeply touched by the beile's remarks. He resented not having been able to pay back De Xiaofeng's friendship in return. He couldn't give up his revenge. He was afraid of having to give up his plans for the future and fight to the death against Huang Jibei! Now twilight encompassed the city, and bats hovered around the street. The night watchmen were already announcing, with their gongs, the first watch.

The cart continued for a long time, then arrived at the Beixin bridge. As he was about to head south, Fuzi exclaimed in a strange voice:

"But who is there?"

He stopped the cart. Immediately several crossbow shots rang out. Inside, Li Mubai lost his temper.

"Huang Jibei couldn't wait any longer! Now he's coming to provoke me!"

He got out quickly, retrieving the seat cushion. He tells Fuzi to take cover inside. In the twilight, he made out more than a dozen men armed with shining blades. Again several arrows were fired, but he deflected them all with his improvised shield.

Li Mubai was fuming. He was disarmed. He risked it all, raising the cushion to protect himself from the shots and rushed at his attackers.

"You are not brigands!" he growled. "You dare to attack a cart in the middle of the street and injure its occupants! Huang Jibei is sending

you, isn't he?"

In front of him, two men were armed with short spears, three with simple sabers and several others with sticks. They all rushed towards Li Mubai. The latter stretched out his hand and seized one of the spears which he managed to tear off violently. He then got rid of the cushion, grabbed his weapon with both hands and engaged in more than a dozen exchanges with his opponents.

Li Mubai touched two of the individuals, there were only about ten left in front of him. The latter, seeing that things were going badly for them, cried out:

"We're going! Hurry up!"

Several fled. In their flight, Li Mubai injured another. The arrows started raining again and he did not dare to chase them. Two men armed with sabers and another with a stick rushed at him. But with his spear, how could he let them approach?

As he was about to skewer them, horses came up in the distance. The riders supported large lanterns on which were affixed large red characters. The three accomplices abandoned their weapons and took to the skies, shouting:

"The authorities are coming!"

Li Mubai panicked. Seeing his assailants slip away, he suddenly had the presence of mind to throw the spear as far as possible and return to the cart to leave immediately. Fuzi had been hit in the leg by an arrow. He had managed to extract it but the pain was still biting. As Li Mubai urged him to go away, he was so afraid for his life that he overcame his suffering and waved the whip vigorously to move the mule forward. The vehicle crossed the Beixin Bridge and appeared to be flying straight south. They soon arrived at the Third Lane of Dongsi Pailou. Further back, the horses of the yamen guards pursued them.

As they approach, Li Mubai tells Fuzi to stop. He waited until they reached the level of the cart before leaning out.

"Where are you running away like this?" said one of the men sternly. "At the moment, weren't several individuals injured by your spear?"

"I don't know who got hurt," Li Mubai retorted. "My name is Li Mubai. I reside with the De family at Third Lane in Dongsai Pailou. I come home late because the Second Lord Tie invited me to eat and drink at his residence. Passing through the Beixin bridge, I noticed that several men were arguing, there was even crossbow fire. My driver was indeed hit in the leg by an arrow. I didn't want to get involved and begged him to get away from the fight. As these gentlemen of the guards approach, do you really think I have room to put a spear in this cart? Go ask the beile's residence, if I carried any weapon during my visit to the Second Lord Tie?"

Originally, the guards were determined to take Li Mubai to the yamen. But the mention of young beile Tie intimidated them and they glanced at each other, not daring to act lightly. They exchanged a few words, then one of the guards approached his mount to the cart. He raised his lantern to light up Li Mubai, whose face was calm and impassive. The man sneered:

"Li Mubai, you are definitely very smart! But we are all aware of your actions. You can go! Anyway, if tomorrow one of the wounded were to die, we would come back for you. You certainly will not have run away from Beijing!"

At these words, Li Mubai lost his temper:

"It goes beyond the limits! Men are fighting in the middle of the street and we are not going to look for the main suspects but to annoy me, a simple passerby! Is that what it means to be an officer? Well, I will ask Second Lord Tie to question His Excellency the Governor as to whether you are worthy of your post!"

One of the guards, aggressive, exclaimed:

"Hey! Do you dare to be arrogant? Let's take him on board!"

Another guard stopped him and waved his hand at Li Mubai:

"You can go! Go away!"

Li Mubai smiled coldly and told Fuzi to go inside.

Back at the residence, the knight began by applying an ointment to Fuzi's wound. He then returned to the library. Shou'er lit the lamps in the room and questioned him about what had happened on the way and about Fuzi's injury. Li Mubai was fuming. With a wave of his hand, he pulled Shou'er out of the room.

Alone, sitting on a chair, the knight was seething and thinking about what had just happened. It was undoubtedly a blow from Huang Jibei. The verdict of the trial concerning De Xiaofeng was about to be handed down and his sentence was not heavy: Huang Jibei had failed to have him sentenced to death. Li Mubai back in Beijing, Huang Jibei could no longer deploy his treacherous schemes as he saw fit and he was looking for a way to annihilate him too. Today he certainly knew that I was going to beile Tie's residence and he ordered these men to ambush me at the Beixin Bridge. He knew very well that ten men could not stop me and he therefore provided them with crossbows. He had also pre-purchased the yamen guards so that they would pass through when the attack came. If my attackers couldn't beat me, then the guards could have arrested me. Fortunately, I managed to get out of it properly, otherwise I would have perished under their arms or would have paid dearly for it in the yamen prisons!

The more Li Mubai thought, the more he got angry. He absolutely had to take revenge on Huang Jibei and eliminate this tyrant from the capital. That evening, the anger that overwhelmed him kept him from sleeping. The next day, he remained more on his guard and carried his sword on his travels. Fuzi's leg injury took two weeks to heal. Several days passed, no further incident occurred.

## Chapter 33

*On a hot day they escort the prisoner,*

*With sincere words, he makes recommendations to his friend;*

*On the highway, at full speed, the courier leaps,*

*The band of brigands is wiped out by the steel blade.*

We were entering the second decade of the sixth lunar month and the heat was suffocating. News of De Xiaofeng and Guard Bai's departure fell. The prisoners would be escorted in two days. Li Mubai was furious to learn and wondered if the authorities had intentionally fixed this departure in the middle of a heatwave in order to finish them off. He immediately went to the beile Tie to ask him to mediate with the yamen and to postpone the trip until the fall.

"The yamen has retained this date for the transfer of the prisoners," replied the beile. "It is impossible to change, unless you tell De Xiaofeng to fake an illness. But personally, I think it's better for him to go, rather than stay in that suffocating oven, getting bitten by mosquitoes and other bugs. After all, the guards escorting him are also men: if it gets too hot in the middle of the day, they'll seek cool shelter in which to rest. No one has an interest in the prisoners dying on the way."

On reflection, Li Mubai approved of the beile and took his leave. He then went to the Ministry of Punishment prison to ask De Xiaofeng for his opinion, but the guards would not let him in. Li Mubai promptly left to meet his uncle, the Qi official, who sent someone to the prison to inquire. On his return, the servant reported to Qi, who forwarded it to Li Mubai.

"I sent a servant to the prison. The Fifth Lord De is very happy to travel. He says it is not necessary for his friends to accompany him and asks his family to prepare some money for him. That's all."

Li Mubai couldn't hold back his tears. He returned immediately to

warn Lady De. While wiping his eyes, wife De took out some money which she gave him. Li Mubai also went to a bank to empty the account De Xiaofeng had left for him. Altogether he gathered two thousand five hundred liang. So as not to tempt thieves, he knew it was wise for a prisoner not to take too much money with him. He went to Qiu Guangchao to ask him to instruct a wealthy trading family in Xinjiang he knew to write a bill of exchange for two thousand liang. He collected the document and the remaining five hundred liang, then returned to his uncle Qi's house to beg him to deliver the bill of exchange to De Xiaofeng. He also gave him three hundred liang for De Xiaofeng's travel expenses.

His uncle Qi refused with his hand.

"Go tell De's family that I don't want the money." It is for you that I help the Fifth Lord De!"

Li Mubai understood that his uncle was complaining about the meager sum offered to him and rushed back to the residence to request a hundred new liang of silver from Lady De. The two hundred liang together were finally accepted by the Qi official. On the way back, the knight grieved. My uncle only helped De Xiaofeng to extract two hundred liang from him. I am concerned for the De family. Li Mubai thought to himself that he absolutely had to pay back all the good things De Xiaofeng had shown him.

The next day, Beile Tie sent Delu to the De residence to speak with Li Mubai. The beile had made an agreement with the prison officials to allow De Xiaofeng to be accompanied on the journey by two servants. He had also paid four hundred liang of money for De Xiaofeng's travel expenses. The knight consulted Lady De and Xiulian. They decided to send Shou'er with his master to Xinjiang. Shou'er was delighted. Yu Xiulian offered to send Sun Zhengli as well.

Li Mubai knew of the Five Talons Eagle's hot temper, which easily provoked fuss. He felt that he should not travel alongside De Xiaofeng. He preferred to discuss it with Yang Jiantang and went to the young Marquis Qiu. Yang Jiantang, who was eager to escort De Xiaofeng to Xinjiang, exclaimed:



"So I will go with the prison guards." On the other hand, it will not be practical to carry my long lance, I will only take a simple sword. Either way, I will remain ruthless if our path crosses that of bandits or thieves."

"You will certainly meet brigands on your way," replied Qiu Guangchao, "but they will not necessarily attack an escort which transfers prisoners. They know full well that convicts never have a lot of money on them. But I fear that Huang Jibei is employing looters to attack you and assassinate Xiaofeng."

Li Mubai gagged at these words. So they decided that Yang Jiantang would be part of the escort as a simple servant to protect him. Li Mubai gave Yang Jiantang the money that Beile Tie had entrusted to the De family, to which he added two hundred liang, all to meet the expenses of the trip. Li Mubai left them and then went to Taixing Escort Agency in Damochang District, near Qianmen, to meet old guard Liu Qiyun. He begged him to send someone to the Sihai Agency to invite Sun Zhengli to join them.

Li Mubai addressed the Eagle at the Five Talons in these terms:

"Tomorrow, De Xiaofeng will be escorted to Xinjiang and Yang Jiantang, the Divine Lance, will accompany him to protect him. Fearing that something happened along the way and that he could not overcome them on his own, I thought to ask my big brother Sun to follow them. You won't have to join the convoy. You will pass yourself off as a simple traveling merchant and protect the escort from afar."

Sun Zhengli accepted without hesitation. Li Mubai then gave him two hundred liang for his expenses. Old guard Liu Qiyun addressed Sun Zhengli:

"When you get back from Xinjiang, I'll hire you! Thus, you will no longer have to hang out at the Sihai agency with Mao Baokun and company."

"It will be perfect!" Sun Zhengli exclaimed. "I have the will and I will help my Uncle Liu, but he will not pay me a salary. Old Yu was an escort guard in the Taixing agency. If I can offer my services there,

it will be to honor my master!"

The three had their lunch together, then Li Mubai returned to De Residence. Lady De spent her day preparing personal belongings and clothes that her husband was going to take away. Everything would be entrusted to Shou'er. Dame De kept busy until the evening.

At dawn the next day, Li Mubai accompanied Shou'er to the Ministry of Punishment and they waited outside the main entrance. Shortly afterwards, Delu and an Imperial Guard, sent by the young beile Tie, also arrived. The guard entered the yamen directly to convey the beile's instructions to the guards who would escort De Xiaofeng. Moments later, Qiu Guangchao, the General of the Silver Lance, and Yang Jiantang, the Divine Lance, made their appearance.

Yang Jiantang wore a gray ensemble and a straw hat. On the bag containing his travel belongings hung a saber in its scabbard. Qiu Guangchao was waving a fan and chatting with Li Mubai in front of the yamen. Several officials came out to pay their respects to Marquis Qiu and invite him to come in and have a rest. Qiu Guangchao declined their proposal:

"Thank you! I'm not going in. I am waiting for my brother De to come and say a few words to him, then I will go back."

The family and close friends of Imperial Guard Bai, who was to be escorted along with De Xiaofeng, were also present. They were discussing among themselves and noticed the presence of Qiu Guangchao and Li Mubai. Some people said that De Xiaofeng got angry with Huang Jibei because of Li Mubai. Their conversations came confusedly to the ears of the latter who felt a great pain, forgetting even to answer the words that Qiu Guangchao addressed to him. In front of the prison was a convoy of five carts adapted for long journeys and provided with cabins, pulled by mules. The one that would bring up the rear had been hired by Qiu Guangchao for Yang Jiantang and De Xiaofeng's servant.

After a while the imperial guard sent by the beile Tie rushed out of the yamen. He walked over to Qiu Guangchao, greeted him

respectfully and announced:

"The Fifth Lord De is coming soon!"

At the same time, about twenty guards passed through the door of the yamen, De Xiaofeng and the so-called Bai also came out under good escort. De Xiaofeng was dressed in civilian clothes. Although he spent several days in prison, his clothes were clean. He appeared to have slimmed down a bit, but seemed full of vigor. He wore light chains and walked with measured steps. His face wore a broad smile. He immediately walked over to Qiu Guangchao and the Imperial Guard of the Tie Residence. He exclaimed, saluting them respectfully with folded hands:

"Thank you very much, gentlemen! Thanks for looking after your brother! But in such a great heat, do not bother to accompany me."

Qiu Guangchao approached and explained what had been implemented for him. He also told him to be careful during the journey and not to worry about Xinjiang as he could no doubt return to the capital in two years at the latest. Qiu Guangchao then offered him the sandalwood fan he had in his hands, as well as a small box containing medicines for cholera. De Xiaofeng accepted the presents with deference, thanked him and entrusted them to Shou'er. He then addressed the Imperial Guard:

"My dear friend, head home. Pass on to Second Lord Tie that on my return from Xinjiang, I will thank him for all his benevolence!"

Li Mubai couldn't hold back his tears, but De Xiaofeng continued as if nothing had happened and addressed Yang Jiantang, a fist in his other hand:

"Big brother, you bother to accompany me so far, I am very sorry for this inconvenience. But we are brothers, I don't have to add more!"

"Be quiet!" replied Yang Jiantang who was not very eloquent, "if anything happens on the trip, I'll be there!"

"There will not necessarily be incidents on the road. It will be the

first time in my life that I have traveled to such remote places, but I do not apprehend it at all. I'm not worried about my family either!"

De Xiaofeng then turned to Li Mubai and said with emotion:

"Little brother, I have only one thing to say to you: take good care of yourself. Whatever happens, do like your big brother, keep an open mind and always think about the future. You better not spend too long in Beijing. Yu Xiulian takes care of your sister-in-law, your nephews and your mother-in-law, so you can be reassured. You must really listen to me and leave the capital without delay! I'll be back in a year or two, so I'll send someone to pick you up."

De Xiaofeng added nothing more. He got into the third cart of the convoy.

The so-called Bai moved into the second. The guards got on and also took over the first and the fourth cart. Yang Jiantang and Shou'er took their places in the last. De Xiaofeng leaned out again and greeted them respectfully, a fist in his other hand. All smiles, he exclaimed:

"Head home please! See you soon! See you soon!"

The convoy of five cars set off and headed south.

Qiu Guangchao, the guard at Tie Residence, and Delu went their separate ways. Only Li Mubai, weeping bitterly, followed the carts as they walked to the Zhangyi Gate. Last year, in the icy wind that whirled the snowflakes, De Xiaofeng had accompanied him there. Now it was his turn. The sophoras and the willows spread their shade, the grain fields stretched out as far as the eye could see. The sun at its zenith was burning like fire. Li Mubai wiped away his drops of sweat and tears. He stayed a long time under this leaden cover, watching the convoy move away, before finally turning around.

He had not yet passed the gate of the capital when he saw a horse galloping up. The tall horseman, who wore a large straw hat and black ensemble, looked like some merchant. From his saddle hung a saber, it was the Eagle of the Five Talons. Sun Zhengli watched him

with a smile but didn't say anything.

"The convoy is hardly far ahead," Li Mubai explained. "Big Brother Sun, you don't have to follow them closely, but don't stray too far from them either!"

Sun Zhengli nodded several times, then whipped his horse to rush after the escort.

Li Mubai walked straight back into town without even looking back. At the residence, he went to Lady De and Yu Xiulian to tell them how De Xiaofeng's departure had gone. Dame De was very moved and sobbed bitterly. Xiulian tried to console her. Li Mubai returned to the library in the outer apartments. Sitting on a chair, he ruminated inwardly what he now had to do and his eyes remained fixed on his precious sword hanging on the wall. He had only one idea in mind, just to wait two or three days for De Xiaofeng to move away from Beijing. So he would go find Huang Jibei and kill him. When De Xiaofeng returned, he would be able to live peacefully again, and the capital would finally be rid of this vermin.

His decision was made. His precious sword was only waiting to shed the blood of this villain. But then a most unexpected event occurred. That same evening, at nightfall, his informant the Little Scolopendre came to the residence to speak to him. He only said a few words to him then Li Mubai without even bothering to put on an overcoat, retrieved his sword and went out with him. They went to the south-eastern corner tower of the inner city, near the Chongwen Gate. This place was called Paozihe, it was a vast wasteland, without a single living soul, even more deserted than the surrounding countryside. It was still very hot despite the late hour, but a cool wind was blowing over the expanse at the foot of the perimeter wall. The darkness was not complete and you could still vaguely make out someone.

"Shi the Fat," Li Mubai exclaimed as he went to meet him, "what's brought you to the capital again?"

It was indeed the Serpent that climbed the Mountain. His strong Shanxi accent sang in Li Mubai's ears again.

"It's been a long time since I arrived in Beijing," he replied cheerfully. "I wanted to give you a hand but I didn't know how to go about it!"

"Everything is settled now," replied Li Mubai, "De Xiaofeng left the capital this very morning... what could you help me with?"

"How could this story be resolved so easily?" Shi replied with a burst of laughter. "Could the hatred that binds you to Huang Jibei be unraveled so easily? It would be so easy. Now I would like to ask you: Considering your deep friendship with the Fifth Lord De, why didn't you escort him to Xinjiang?"

"Yang Jiantang took care of it. I didn't have to join them. I stay here to look after his family."

"Lord Li," Shi the Fat nodded, "it's really not easy to be friends with you! You're still not telling me the truth. I know very well that Yang Jiantang, the Divine Lance of Yanqing, pretends to be a servant of De Xiaofeng in order to walk by his side. It's not just him. What about Sun? Doesn't he also follow them from afar to protect them?"

Li Mubai was stunned. He told himself that Shi was very quickly aware of everything that was happening, and wondered how he knew all this... It was perhaps Little Scolopendre who informed him! Li Mubai smiled and listened to Shi the Fat.

"Not only do I know that there are several men protecting the Fifth Lord De during the journey, but I also know that the De family are not counting on you. Currently, isn't your sister-in-law Meng, young Yu Xiulian, staying at the residence? If she's there, even if a leopard leaps over the city walls, who could be afraid?"

Hearing Meng's name, Li Mubai was immediately saddened and thought about his friend.

"I also know what you're up to," he continued. "You intentionally stayed in Beijing and waited for the Fifth Lord De to leave so you could finally face Huang Jibei. Valiant Lord Li, you are a hero, I really admire you! But there is something else. Huang Jibei is now in cahoots with Zhang Yujin, the Golden Spear, Tao Hong, the Black

Tiger, Wei Fengxiang, The One Who Surpasses Lü Bu, and with an acquaintance of mine, the tyrant Liu Qi of Zhuo Prefecture. All of these men received a lot of money from Lean Buddha Amida. They came to an agreement and had informants posted all along the way. They wait for the convoy to pass through the Baoding government to intercept them and kill De Xiaofeng.

"For now, only Tao Hong, the Black Tiger, does not want to participate in the ambush. Firstly, because he still hasn't recovered from the injury Yu Xiulian gave him last year. And second, because his master Feng Mao, the Golden Sabers, forbade him to mess with these Jianghu men in an affair that risks losing face. I'm afraid Yang Jiantang and Sun Zhengli can't do much between them against Zhang Yujin, Wei Fengxiang and their gang!"

Li Mubai immediately agreed with Fat Shi's words:

"If so, I'm going to join them! The gates of the city are certainly already closed, I will set off tomorrow!"

"Well, then you will leave at dawn! On horseback, you will certainly catch up with them. Push back Zhang Yujin and his men, then escort De Xiaofeng's convoy through the Baoding government! We will meet in Beijing and I will help you exterminate this Huang Jibei!"

"Thanks, but I won't need your help!"

"Good! If you won't let me help you, then I'll get some rest!"

Li Mubai asked him where he was staying.

"I don't have a fixed place," Shi smiles. "In addition, I am wanted in Beijing, I can only go out at night."

Li Mubai didn't question him anymore and greeted him with a fist in his other hand.

"I'm going home," he told him. "See you soon!"

"See you next time!" Shi the Fat also said farewell.

Li Mubai walked back to the residence in the dark of the night. He went directly to the interior apartments. He explained to Lady De and Yu Xiulian that he was leaving the next day for Baoding to see a friend and have him look after De Xiaofeng. He would definitely be back in five or six days. Dame De looked embarrassed but couldn't help it. She feared that after his departure something would happen at the residence. Yu Xiulian noticed Li Mubai's worried look. She thought that if he went to Baoding, where Zhang Yujin and Tao Hong dictated their laws, it was only to meet and confront them. Xiulian responded enthusiastically, as if encouraging him:

"If my big brother has some business to take care of, let him leave without fear: as long as I'm here, everything will be fine!"

"Thank you for your trouble, I'll let you take care of everything!"

Yu Xiulian nodded silently. Li Mubai returned to his room. He reflects on the treacherous ploy that Huang Jibei had deployed in allying with men like Zhang Yujin and Wei Fengxiang to assassinate De Xiaofeng. His anger was growing and he was dying to get on his horse and set off for Baoding in one go. He wouldn't wait for Zhang Yujin and his men to ambush them: he would finish them off without delay so that De Xiaofeng could walk safely. Li Mubai slept very badly that night.

The next day, at dawn, he asked Fuzi to prepare a mount for him. He then made recommendations to the servants of the residence.

"After I leave, you will all have to be more vigilant. If anything unusual happens, ask Miss Yu for instructions!"

He grabbed his precious sword and rode out of the residence. The sun was rising. The atmosphere remained stifling despite a light morning breeze. Wearing a large straw hat and wearing a yellow ensemble of light silk, Li Mubai was already dripping with sweat.

As he passed the Zhangyi Gate, he released the bridle of his mount. After browsing over a dozen lises, he saw a black horse tied under a bridge. A stout man, in light silk black trousers and an open shirt, was waving a fan and enjoying the coolness. Li Mubai knew



immediately that it was Shi the Fat. This man is really strange, he thought. Why is he going to so much trouble to help me? While smiling, Li Mubai approached him.

"I guess you were expecting me!" he exclaimed. "Okay, get in the saddle and come with me to Baoding!"

"You look in a better mood to me today, Lord Li," Shi replied. "I certainly won't be of much help to you when the time comes, but I figured in such hot weather I could keep you company on the ride and keep you from having a bad blood."

"But I am absolutely not worried!" Li Mubai retorted.

Shi the Fat folded up his fan which he slipped into his wide belt and retrieved a straw hat which he put on his head. He then untied his horse and mounted the saddle. The two mounts walked side by side on the path and headed south, under the blazing sun. Shi Jiang, the Serpent who climbed the Mountain, rather stout in nature, very quickly began to sweat profusely. He took off his light silk shirt, revealing a plump, crimson back. He rode like this and refused to stop. At noon, in a village, they found a small tea house where they had lunch.

It was so hot that Li Mubai ate little. Shi the Fat, as usual, swallows more than two jin (38) of large patties and more than half a jin of donkey meat.

After the meal, Li Mubai noticed that Shi kept yawning and thought to give him a nap before heading back on the road.

"Anyway," he said, "the convoy is about sixty li ahead of us. Our horses are moving faster than them, but we won't catch up with them today or even maybe tomorrow. We are not in such a hurry."

Shi the Fat didn't sound so fatalistic. He wet his face with cold water and insisted on leaving without delay. They set off again. The two black steeds set off at a gallop under the suffocating summer sun. That same evening, they had caught up with Sun Zhengli, the Eagle of the Five Talons.

Li Mubai introduced him to Shi Jiang before asking him if the convoy was far ahead.

"He's only four or five li from us," Sun Zhengli replied. "We can catch up with them quickly on horseback."

"No need to join them," replied Li Mubai. "We will continue to move forward separately. We must not be seen by the guards in order to avoid arousing their suspicion."

They then found an inn. Li Mubai and Shi the Fat stayed together, but Sun Zhengli appeared there alone, like the merchant he was not, and like the bodyguard he was not to show.

They resumed their journey the next day, at dawn. They had only walked a few li when they saw in the distance, on the vast bare lane, the convoy of five cars escorting De Xiaofeng. The riders then advanced more slowly. They walked on like this for another day. The next day, they reached Zhuo Prefecture.

Shi the Fat then addressed Li Mubai:

"Let's walk separately! I have a friend in Zhuo, the tyrant Liu Qi. Usually, if I cross the prefecture, I stop at his place for a few days. He treats me very well. Last year, he fought against Yu Xiulian who hurt him, and he now hates her. Huang Jibei also recruited him recently, and now he hates you and is jealous of you with De Xiaofeng, so he decided to help Zhang Yujin. If he went to join him in Baoding, it will be settled, but if he is still at home, and learns that I am walking by your side, although it does not matter to you, he would not forgive me. Never! He has countless minions under his command who have eyes and ears everywhere. His saber technique is remarkable and I wouldn't dare to irritate him!"

Li Mubai smiled coldly when he heard Shi the Fat fear this Liu Qi. He nodded.

"Okay, let's go our separate ways temporarily."

Li Mubai left Shi and let go of his horse's bridle. He caught up with the convoy in no time and held his mount again. Knowing that Liu

Qi was one of the men who had been bribed by Huang Jibei to harm De Xiaofeng, Li Mubai did not dare to leave the convoy and looked out for any suspicious behavior. He walked like this all day and the convoy crossed Zhuo prefecture without any incident occurring.

In the evening, Li Mubai stayed at an inn in Gaobeidian town. Shi the Fat joined him there bringing some fresh news. Liu Qi was already in Baoding. He had also heard that Tao Hong, the Black Tiger, no longer wanted to help them and that none of his minions would lend a helping hand. Because of this, he almost got into a fight with Zhang Yujin, but thus respected the words of his master, Feng Mao, the Golden Sabers.

Li Mubai felt a strong admiration for Feng Mao. He is a true brave of Rivers and Lakes. When I defeated him last year in Beijing, he did not hate me and, on the contrary, withdrew from Jianghu. Even today, he prevents his disciple from opposing De Xiaofeng. Later, if I don't die, I absolutely have to befriend him!

He spent the night at the inn. The next day, he resumed his journey as before with Shi the Fat. They walked for several days. They passed through Dingxing District, arrived at the Xushui District border, and finally reached the Baoding government. The two riders were more and more on their guard and no longer dared to lose sight of the convoy. The road was more winding and few passers-by ventured on the path in the stifling heat. On the parched earth, the horses' hooves raised a thick cloud of dust. From the edges of the path, the ears of grain in the fields seemed stiff, as if petrified.

"It's a bad year!" Shi exclaimed. "If it doesn't rain in a few days, the harvest could be lost!"

Li Mubai, as if he couldn't hear him, was looking straight ahead.

They walked another five or six li when they came to a crossroads. They then saw a cloud of dust rising over the west lane. The galloping sound came closer and four horses tumbled down. Their riders all wore short sweat-soaked tunics and straw hats. They stopped their mounts to take a look around them, then all together again darted south, turning around continually. They were looking

back to observe Li Mubai and Shi the Fat.

Li Mubai noticed that there were weapons hanging from their saddle. Two of them appeared to carry long-handled weapons. One of the men seemed familiar to Li Mubai and he suddenly recognized Wei Fengxiang, the One who Surpasses Lü Bu, whom he had defeated in Shahe Township. He was about to draw his sword.

Shi held back his horse's bridle and exclaimed:

"Don't move! Stay here!"

He looked totally panicked. He then nodded in the direction of the horsemen.

"Look!" he cried. "The man in black is Zhang Yujin. The other three, I don't know them. They certainly spotted us!"

"The path is always too narrow when enemies meet there," Li Mubai said coldly. "Instead of being afraid of them, brother Shi, let's take the opportunity instead to eliminate them and thus avoid alarming De Xiaofeng!"

Without delay, Li Mubai rushed after them and yelled as he drew his sword:

"You, ahead! Stop!"

The riders held back the bridles of their horses and exchanged a few words. It was certainly Wei Fengxiang who told Zhang Yujin that the man chasing them was none other than Li Mubai. The four individuals immediately dismounted and each drew their weapon.

Zhang Yujin, his Golden Spear in hand, stood in the middle of the path. He told Wei Fengxiang and his companions:

"All of you stand back and let me face him alone. I'll finally find out what he's worth!"

Wei Fengxiang, who brandished his halberd with the decorated pole, exclaimed:

"Today, I will be able to take revenge!"

Li Mubai had moved closer. With a bound, he jumped from his horse and pointed at Wei Fengxiang with his precious sword.

"You have already lost miserably against me! If you approach, you will only find death! Well, tell me, which of you is Zhang Yujin?"

"I am Lord Zhang, the Golden Spear," he exclaimed, raising his weapon. "Are you Li Mubai?"

"Indeed, it's me!" he replied, slapping his chest. "It seems that last year Huang Jibei employed you and brought you to Beijing. An urgent matter then forced me to leave the capital and we could not compete with each other. You spread the rumor that I feared you and that I dared not meet you. I was furious, but I didn't have time to take care of a youngster like you. Now, Huang Jibei is instigating you to assassinate De Xiaofeng. Your actions are really pitiful! I just caught up with you, but I have always been magnanimous and the hatred that binds us is not that great. So if you repent and swear never to cause trouble for De Xiaofeng again, I will save your life. But know that my character has changed a lot in a year: if my hand goes up, I won't spare any of your lives!"

His only real enemy was Huang Jibei. His hatred for Zhang Yujin and these men was not that deep, and he told himself that he didn't necessarily have to go after their lives. But Zhang Yujin, who was stamping with anger, retorted:

"Give me the grace of life? Lord Zhang has opened an escort agency in Henan and he will not return until he confronts you. If you hadn't been there, I could have killed Old Eagle Yu and thus avenge my father-in-law! Yu Xiulian and De Xiaofeng offended Fourth Lord Huang, murdered my uncle, and injured my friends, Lords Liu Qi and Tao. I don't care how big you look! We're finally meeting today, if it's not you who die, then it will be me! Come over and show us what you can do, Li!"

Zhang Yujin brandished his spear to strike Li Mubai in the throat. The latter blocked the attack with his sword in time.

The knight dodged aside and retaliated by punching Zhang Yujin in the direction of the chest. Zhang immediately took a few steps back and raised his spear again to rush at Li Mubai. The latter then extended a hand and grasped the handle of the Golden Lance. Wei Fengxiang also joined the fight by stepping forward with his halberd.

Li Mubai firmly held Zhang Yujin's spear, while parrying Wei Fengxiang's attacks with his other hand. He took a few steps aside and brandished his blade in Wei's direction. At that moment, Zhang Yujin tried to retrieve his weapon using both hands, but could only fidget in vain. The knight was holding on and Zhang couldn't hope to take it back from him by force. The other two accomplices, friends of Wei Fengxiang, also rushed at Li Mubai with their sabers. A single exchange is enough for him to touch one of them. He then let go of the spear and counterattacked Wei Fengxiang. He first thought to settle his score and then attack Zhang Yujin.

Wei Fengxiang fought head-to-head and hit all over the place with his halberd. Li Mubai's power was fierce, he was blocking all his attacks. He suddenly leaned closer and raised his weapon. Wei Fengxiang couldn't parry the blow in time, and the blade hit him in the right arm. He howled miserably, let go of his halberd and lay down on the ground, as if dead.

Zhang Yujin violently waved his spear and attacked Li Mubai from behind. The latter immediately turned and parried with his sword raised to the horizontal. He then approached and punched in the direction of Zhang Yujin's chest. Zhang stepped back and caught his breath, before rushing forward again. After three or four exchanges, the blade of the precious sword glistened, dazzling Zhang Yujin. Li Mubai was fast and Zhang, who seemed to have no idea where to turn, hurriedly exclaimed:

"Stop! I want to tell you something!"

But Li Mubai's blade was already hitting. Zhang Yujin cried out briefly and the precious sword dug into his left side. He let go of his Golden Spear and both hands squeezed his side. He fell, his body turned to the sky. His blood spurted out and he couldn't make a sound. Li Mubai raised his blade again to deliver a final killing

blow, but he changed his mind and lowered his sword. After all, their hatred wasn't so deep, what good was it to finish it off coldly?

The man who remained threw his sword to the ground and knelt in front of Li Mubai begging him to spare his life.

"Stand up!" Li Mubai exclaimed. "I'm not going to kill you, I'm not that cruel. Those, I had to take care of. But, I don't have to discuss this with you. You just have to remember that it was Li Mubai who defeated them. Whether it is the authorities or their relatives, if some are not satisfied, tell them that they will be able to come and find me in Beijing in ten days and that this matter concerns only me and no one else!"

The man nodded several times, hitting the ground with his forehead.

Li Mubai drew in his sword and mounted his horse again. Shi the Fat came at a gallop and passed him.

"Lord Li," he cried, "come quickly! They are fighting over there, it is the tyrant Liu Qi!"

Without asking any questions, Li Mubai rushed south at full speed. Four or five li away the convoy was attacked. Yang Jian-tang and Sun Zhengli each wielded their saber in a fierce fight against a dozen individuals.

Li Mubai came in full speed raising his sword and screaming. He jumped from his horse and rushed into the fight. He promptly wounded two of the attackers. Liu Qi, shirtless, was fighting against Sun Zhengli. Yang Jiantang was protecting the cart De Xiaofeng was in. He repelled several henchmen of the little tyrant, unable to come to the aid of the Eagle of the Five Talons. Sun Zhengli was holding out against Liu Qi, who was giving him a lot of trouble. The arrival of the knight gave him courage and he hugged his opponent even closer.

"Move out of the way!" Li Mubai then cried, rushing forward.

Liu Qi threw himself aside but Sun Zhengli hit him on the back and

he fell to the ground. Sun Zhengli was scrambling in all directions, hitting several other attackers. The knight stopped him in his murderous impetus and Sun Zhengli finally lowered his weapon.

The bandits who were not injured fled at full speed. Liu Qi, who was missing a piece of flesh on his back, had passed out - perhaps he had already passed away. Sun Zhengli, who was about to finish him off with several blows of the blade, had his saber torn off by Li Mubai who placed it firmly back in its scabbard attached to the saddle.

"Go ahead!" Li Mubai exclaimed, annoyed.

Sun Zhengli understood that he didn't want De Xiaofeng to think he was there to protect him. He chuckled and climbed back on his mount. He wiped off his sweat and then resumed his journey. At that point, De Xiaofeng got out of the cart and the convoy guards stepped forward to thank Li Mubai.

He noticed that neither of them seemed alarmed by this attack and immediately understood what was going on. The guards knew that Liu Qi, Zhang Yujin, and their men were going to attack the convoy to attack De Xiaofeng, and Huang Jibei had certainly even bribed them all. Li Mubai clearly showed his anger and coolly addressed the guards:

"Gentlemen, you can continue your journey without fear! I'm sure there won't be any more incidents. I myself instantly injured Zhang Yujin and Wei Fengxiang!"

He continued, beating his chest:

"I, Li Mubai, after what just happened, I'm not afraid of anything anymore! Be very careful! My precious sword will never tolerate a man with disrespect to Lord De!"

These words made all the guards turn pale with terror, and they answered in unison:

"We will never dare to treat the Fifth Lord De without consideration. Rest easy, Lord Li!"



De Xiaofeng then approached and asked:

"Brother, why did you come? Have you decided to go home?"

Li Mubai shook his head. At De Xiaofeng's benevolent expression, tears of grief began to flow down his cheeks. Li Mubai drew his own mount and placed his sword back into its scabbard. He climbed into the saddle and then greeted De Xiaofeng with a fist in his other hand.

"Big brother, take good care of yourself!" He exclaimed.

He also greeted Yang Jiantang. He turned his horse around and set off north on the path he had come on.

He turned around several times to observe the convoy. He was not fully reassured until he saw the carts slowly resuming their journey. Li Mubai didn't know where Fat Shi had slipped away. He didn't bother looking for him at all and thought only of riding north, enduring the extreme heat that made him sweat profusely. He was returning to Beijing, traveling in one go. He retained a deep indignation within him and was determined to eliminate Huang Jibei, the Lean Buddha Amida. Li Mubai didn't care about his fate, it didn't matter whether he lived or died after his act.

He walked like this for two days. At nightfall, he arrived in the vicinity of the capital, near the Liuli River. For most people, the purple clouds of twilight were a beautiful color, but in his eyes they were just bloodstains. He whipped his horse across the vast desert countryside. The grain fields stretched out as far as the eye could see and we could hear the murmur of the evening breeze of summer days that caressed the ears of corn, recalling the song of insects or the breath of his sword slashing. There were no hamlets around. Li Mubai did not see any smoke from the cottage or any passerby. He walked alone on this road and walked another li or two before night fell. He was in such a hurry to get home that he did not look for an inn.

As he walked, he suddenly heard the sound of hooves in the distance. Li Mubai turned around and saw a horse coming towards him. He was greatly surprised and wondered if it could be Shi who

had found him. He then held back his mount and looked more closely. The animal was gradually approaching and, by the light that the clouds let in at times, the knight realized that it was white. His rider was an old man of tall stature, with beard and graying hair - not Shi the Fat or his black steed. Li Mubai therefore resumed his walk without paying the slightest attention to the individual.

After a few trots, a clicking sound is heard. The man had indeed just whipped the knight's back! The old man burst out laughing and squeezed his mount past Li Mubai's. It rushed off like a whirlwind of white smoke. The pain from the blow was insignificant, but Li Mubai couldn't stand such mannerisms and immediately rushed after him.

"Hey! The old man in front, stop!" he yelled. "Why are you hitting me like this?"

Li Mubai noticed that there was no more trace of the rider. He had in front of him only the twilight of the night, sparse by purple clouds floating adrift.

Li Mubai, stunned, held back his horse's bridle. He had vaguely caught a glimpse of the old man's face, which seemed familiar to him. He thought for a long time and suddenly realized: Hey! This man bears a slight resemblance to Yu Xiongyuan, the Iron Winged Eagle of Julu. He is certainly also an old knight errant of the Rivers and Lakes. I don't know him, but he seems to know who I am. During this chance meeting, he couldn't help but tease me like that. He didn't whip me very hard and that shows that he didn't have bad intentions towards me. I must get back to Beijing as soon as possible to settle my affairs. What's the point of chasing this old man and getting angry with him? Li Mubai no longer attached any importance to the incident and urged his horse to move forward on the wide road.

Li Mubai finally reached the capital. He walked through the city gates, but he did not go to the De family residence. He also did not visit beile Tie or Qiu Guangchao, but stayed at a small inn near the Anding Gate. He claimed to be called Chen and came from Zhangjiakou. He rested for a moment, then drew his precious sword from its scabbard and wrapped it in his long overcoat. He was only

wearing a short black ensemble. He left his hat and strode out of the inn with his blade under his arm. It was with his heart burning with impatience and bubbling with indignation that he entered the city to finally accomplish his revenge against Huang Jibei.

## Chapter 34

*In the little courtyard the treacherous man finds death,*

*The disciple fulfills his vengeance and restores justice;*

*Despite the unexpected warning, in the cell, she intrudes.*

*The knight errant conceals the sword and surprises the golden hairpin*  
(39).

When Li Mubai passed through the Anding Gate, it was not quite five in the afternoon. The sun was still high in the sky and its intensity was not weakening. With his sword under his arm, Li Mubai entered the capital. He inquired of passers-by and went to the Beixin Bridge area, in front of Huang Jibei's house. The front door was imposing, adorned with exquisite carvings of floral representations, carved from the brick. Two large black doors, framed by sheets of steel, were closed. There was no one at the door. Li Mubai thought to himself that Huang Jibei had been vigilant and had taken all precautions for a long time. He did not spend too long on the scene because he knew that Huang Jibei's men knew him.

Dinner time had already passed. The cicadas on the tree had ceased their song, the evening breeze was blowing weakly. In each household, the grandmothers, children and young women had finished eating and were now cooling off in front of the entrance to their house. The grandmothers were discussing everyday trifles with each other, the children were running and fidgeting in all directions, the young women made up in red and powder were standing on their doorsteps, all coquettish, and laughing among themselves. by hiding their smile with their handkerchief. A few cheeky boys waddled past, shirts open and braids coiled over their heads. They hummed frivolous and sly tunes, as their eyes lingered on the bodies of the young women.

Sitting under the tree, doing nothing, with his clothes rolled up, Li Mubai began to attract attention. His stomach signaling him that he

was hungry, so he straightened up, shook his clothes, then pulled his sword under his arm out of the alleyway. He entered a small stall, ordered from the clerk two bowls of noodles which he mixed with sesame paste and ate slowly with two cucumbers. When he had finished eating, night had fallen. It was time to take care of Huang Jibei. Li Mubai had a desire for murder and a desire for revenge: he absolutely had to eliminate Huang Jibei that night.

He strolled along the avenues, between the alleys, and found himself in front of a small tea house. At the entrance was an arbor lit by oil lamps, crowded with people listening to a storyteller's story. He wore a light shirt and held a folding fan in his hand which he used as if it were a weapon. He was telling the story of Shuihuzhuan and was at the point where "on a snowy night, Lin Chong climbed the lair of the Liang Mountains". (40)

Li Mubai retrieved a stool and a waiter poured him a cup of tea. He put his sword down on the corner of the table and listened to the story while drinking. Lin Chong was an Imperial Guard instructor and was manhandled by supervising officer Lu. Lin Chong, who had been banished to a military garrison, suffered in silence. His enemies did everything to assassinate him and Lin Chong, having had to kill Officer Lu, then ascended the lair of the Liang Mountains. Lin Chong's situation reminded Li Mubai of his own condition and he was very moved. He thought: Last year when I arrived in Beijing, I did not get the job I had come for. Fortunately, De Xiaofeng provided for my needs and supported me. I have never used this friendship to offend anyone or engage in any wrongdoing. I was not responsible for my duels against Feng Long and Feng Mao, because they are the ones who came to me every time. It did not concern Huang Jibei at all!

Huang Jibei believed that I posed a threat to his reputation and he came to Faming Temple in person to confront me. I defeated him in boxing. He then hypocritically befriended me so that he could deliberately harm me. He then plotted against me with Fat Lu San: they falsely accused me of being a thief and I ended up in jail. If De Xiaofeng had not vouched for me as if I had been a member of his family, the beile Tie would not have stepped in to save me, and I would have been unjustly executed! Huang Jibei wanted to kill De

Xiaofeng, but he couldn't. He then brought Zhang Yujin and Miao Zhenshan to the capital and instructed them to do everything to kill us, De Xiaofeng and myself.

At that time, Meng Sizhao was injured in Gaoyang and I left to join him there. De Xiaofeng could count on the help of Yang Jian-tang and Qiu Guangchao, but they were no match for them.

Fortunately, Yu Xiulian, then residing in the De family, killed Miao Zhenshan, greatly weakening their strength. I came back from Gaoyang and only spent one day in Beijing. After Xianniang's tragic death, I preferred to go home. As soon as I left the capital, De Xiaofeng remained confined to his home, avoiding creating stories. Everything seemed to be back to normal and the hatred dissipated. In fact, Huang Jibei was trying every means to get De Xiaofeng imprisoned and did not resign himself to leaving him alive!

De Xiaofeng was forced into exile in a garrison in Xinjiang, but this unjust and painful sentence did not seem to satisfy Huang Jibei, who prompted Zhang Yujin and his band of bandits to attack the convoy during the trip and assassinate him. The other night again, he sent his henchmen to block the passage of my vehicle at the level of the Beixin bridge to riddle me with crossbow arrows. What low blows! If I do not eliminate him, De Xiaofeng will no longer be able to live in peace upon his return, and other people may fall victim to his misdeeds. If Lin Chong found himself in the same situation as me, he couldn't tolerate it either!

Li Mubai was fuming with rage. How could he have continued to listen to the story? He immediately paid what he owed, retrieved his sword wrapped in his garment, and hurried off. His blood was pounding in his veins, his legs were racing, and he was picking up the pace. In the depths of the night, he crossed several small winding alleys and finally arrived in front of the entrance to Huang Jibei's home, where the two leaves of the large door were still locked. No sound arose from the entrance, and behind the walls of the house everything seemed equally quiet, like an old tomb.

Li Mubai thought to cross the wall to get inside the house. He wanted to find Huang Jibei's apartments, draw his sword and kill him. However, the eve ringers had only passed twice so far and

there were still a few sparse walkers on the avenue of Beixin bridge. Li Mubai feared acting too soon and thus awakening the snake lurking in the grass, allowing Huang Jibei to slip away. Li Mubai, cautious, did not stay in front of the entrance. He turned into a small alley and walked straight ahead. His footsteps led him to the area of the perimeter wall east of Anding Gate. Houses were few and far between and the city wall was imposing. The evening breeze blew through the grass and the branches of the trees,

Li Mubai put down his sword and sat down on the ground at the foot of the wall. He watched the stars twinkle in the sky. The reflections which crossed his head were more numerous than all these stars. Life is bristling with difficulties and men are truly treacherous, he told himself. Me, Li Mubai, all I did was study diligently and learn the art of the sword, how could I have imagined the complexity of human relationships? I am not yet thirty years old, but I already feel weary and exhausted from life, having experienced all kinds of suffering in this lower world. It will take a long time for my body to recover. Honestly, although I managed to make myself somewhat famous, I will never be able to forget the death of my friend Meng Sizhao and that of Xie Cuixian and it will be very difficult for me to get young Yu Xiulian out of her sad situation. All this is eating away at me, how could I still care about fame? With my aspirations, how could I experience any satisfaction? It would be better if I end this hatred and kill Huang Jibei. And if it's death that finds me, it will be as well!

Silently, Li Mubai thought for a long time. When he saw fit, he straightened up. He crossed all the small alleys again and returned to the entrance of Huang Jibei. There were now no passers-by in the street, nor any watch ringers or barking dogs. At the foot of the wall, Li Mubai drew his precious sword from his garment. The blade glittered with a bluish sheen. He tied his overcoat around his waist and placed his sword behind his back. With a bound he reached the top of the wall, from where he jumped into the courtyard. He calmly returned to the main courtyard, then walked along a corridor to the private apartments. He had not yet reached the inner courtyard when he heard barking. Li Mubai quickly scrambled up the corridor pole and found himself on the roof.

Li Mubai got irritated. Huang Jibei, you are no good. Not only do you employ Zhang Yujin to risk his life for you, but you use these beasts to watch over your house. But this won't stop me from breaking into your house to kill you! As he was about to take action, he suddenly realized that despite the barking dogs, all the rooms were dark and he noticed no commotion. He suddenly thought: I underestimated Huang Jibei. After De Xiaofeng left, he suspected that I was not going to forgive him. How could he have waited for death at home? A cunning man has more than one escape route. Doesn't Huang Jibei have other residences? On closer inspection, he certainly no longer lives here.

Li Mubai retraced his steps, crossed the wall again and walked along the small alleys to the foot of the city wall, near the Anding Gate. He lay down at the foot of the wall and fell asleep. When he opened his eyes again, he saw the sparse stars in the sky again. In the East stood the first light of day. The dew had soaked his clothes. The knight straightened up and immediately thought of that deceitful Huang Jibei. He would certainly have a hard time getting revenge on him, which infuriated him. He told himself that from now on he should not be in a hurry and take the time to find out about where he was. Li Mubai again wrapped his sword in his overcoat and left the scene.

With the morning breeze, the dew-soaked clothes gradually dried.

Li Mubai crossed all the small alleys again, until he could see the edge of Huang Jibei's house. From a distance, he saw that the doors of the main entrance were still closed. A few paces from him, to the west, was a merchant with a handle of soy milk. The knight approached without taking his eyes off the front door. He bought a bowl, and when he had drunk it, asked for a second.

At that moment, Li Mubai noticed a passerby on the east side of the street. He wore a black crepe dress, a matching gauze waistcoat, and a small, light hat of the same material. He looked like a servant. He knocked on the door of Huang Jibei's home. Li Mubai recognized him then. It was his personal servant. Li Mubai was greatly astonished: This servant always accompanies Huang Jibei, why is he now standing in front of this door which does not seem to have been opened yet? It is obvious that Huang Jibei does not



reside here. Fortunately I did not do any reckless acts last night! After he finished drinking his second bowl of soy milk, he retrieved his bundled sword and skirted the wall that faced his enemy's home. He hurried forward to the east. When he was far enough away, he stood behind a willow tree to observe the entrance. The servant had already passed the door. After a while, he came out with an object about two chi long. It could have been an opium pipe wrapped in cloth. The two leaves of the black door closed. The servant scanned all around him, then headed east, carrying what he had come to seek.

The man left on foot. Li Mubai deduces that Huang Jibei must not have resided far away. He let the servant pass him, then followed him, lowering his head, his sword wrapped under his arm. The servant glanced back several times but never seemed to notice the knight. After crossing the Beixin Bridge, he went straight east, then turned into a street to the south. Li Mubai quickened his pace. He walked south and again saw the servant walking down an even narrower alley. He then stopped in front of a small entrance to the north of the alley and knocked on the door.

Li Mubai spotted the entrance and retraced his steps to wait a moment. He questioned an old man who was standing there, smoking his pipe:

"Excuse me, old uncle," he said kindly, "the small entrance to the north of this hutong, is it the Zhang family's?"

The man remained thoughtful, then shook his head.

"It is the Huang family who live there, their name is not Zhang," he replied. "Who are you looking for?"

As soon as he heard that it was the Huang family, Li Mubai rejoiced and asked with a smile:

"It is surely there. I am looking for the servant of the Fourth Lord Huang who resides at Beixin Bridge.

"So that's it," the old man agreed. I don't know his name, but the one who always accompanies Fourth Lord Huang is called Shunzi

and people mostly call him Huang Shun. He recently moved in. This little house, it was the Fourth Lord Huang who bought it for him, and it is also he who found his wife!"

Li Mubai saw that everything was alright and thanked the old man. He said to himself: Huang Jibei, you only have today to live! You may be smart, but you will not escape me!

He walked down the alley again, drew his precious sword, and sounded the knocker in the small entrance to the north. Li Mubai was fuming. He banged vigorously on the door. Quickly someone exclaimed from inside:

"Who are you looking for?"

Li Mubai had the presence of mind to reply:

"Open up, I am Mao Baokun from Sihai Agency, I have urgent news to convey to Fourth Lord Huang!"

There was no response, as if the man had gone to ask for instructions. Shortly after, another person exclaimed:

"There is no Fourth Lord Huang here, you must have been on the wrong door, go ask elsewhere!"

Then he heard a thud, as if someone were adding a stone to wedge the door.

Li Mubai's whole body shook with rage. He knew full well that his enemy Huang Jibei was hiding inside the house. He hadn't opened the door to him and he found himself cut off in his tracks without being able to exterminate this vile mobster! Li Mubai looked up and saw that the wall was not very high. At the top were many iron nails and bits of glass, but that couldn't prevent him from entering. The alley was withdrawn. It consisted of at most five hearths. It was still very early, none of the families had opened. Apart from him, sword in hand, there was no one. Li Mubai was seething, he couldn't contain himself any longer. He then risked it all and, in a whisper, jumped up the wall. With a leap, he found himself in the small courtyard of Huang Jibei's lair.

Shunzi and a pale-faced fellow were still moving stones to prop up the door. As soon as they saw that Li Mubai had just stepped over the wall, they started screaming. The tall fellow was one of Huang Jibei's personal guards, on behalf of Hou Liang, the Local Despot. He immediately retrieved one of the sabers left on the ground and rushed at Li Mubai. The latter blocked the attack, wrapped his sword around the saber and touched Hou Liang who fell to the ground. Li Mubai then rushed to the entrance of the private apartments.

From the north wing suddenly appeared a young and beautiful woman, disheveled, with a dripping blush, who seemed to have risen instantly. She stood across the door to prevent him from entering and cried:

"Ah! What are you doing here? You dare to enter with a sword in your hand! Do you ignore the laws? Hurry up! Otherwise I'll scream and call the authorities!"

Li Mubai raised his sword and approached, shouting:

"Move out of the way! Let Huang Jibei out!"

Li Mubai waved his sword. The frightened young woman immediately entered the room screaming and closed it behind her. Li Mubai stepped forward and thumped the door open.

In the bedroom, Huang Jibei, the Lean Buddha Amida, could no longer hide. He picked up his pair of hooked sabers from the table and panicking exclaimed:

"Li Mubai, wait for me in the yard, I'm going out. There is a woman here!"

"Well," agreed Li Mubai, "don't think you are taking the opportunity to escape!"

Li Mubai stepped back and stood guard in the small courtyard. Huang Jibei then stepped out, wearing short blue silk pants, his two hook swords in hand. His thin face was white with fear, but he forced himself to smile.

"Brother Li," he said, "we are usually friends! Last year, I came to see you when you were in prison. Why are you listening to Lord De and coming to seek me at the risk of your life?"

When Li Mubai heard him mention the hypocrite visiting the prison, as well as his accusation against De Xiaofeng, he fumed more and replied coldly:

"Huang Jibei, how can you tell such nonsense? How many times have you wanted to harm me? How many times have you wanted to harm De Xiaofeng? You're still trying to fool me with your so called friendship, don't you think I know all about it? You can speak as long as you want, I, Li Mubai, will kill you. I will eliminate you and your perfidious smile to avenge De Xiaofeng and to eradicate the calamity that you are from the capital!"

Li Mubai then raised his precious sword and rushed at Huang Jibei, who parried with his hooked swords.

"Brother Li!" he cried. "Listen to what I have to say to you... if you want to be reconciled with me, I offer you fifty thousand liang of silver!"

"Who wants your smelly money!" Replied the knight, glaring at him and rushing at him again.

Huang Jibei had no alternative but to rush headlong into the fight. He deployed his two sabers and faced Li Mubai.

In the small courtyard, the simple sword and the pair of hooked sabers made four or five exchanges. Huang Jibei had spent the past few months practicing his weapon of choice daily and was not defending himself too badly, but how could he have overcome the ferocity of Li Mubai and his sword? As he parried the blows and stepped back, he began to shout frantically:

"To me! Guards! I am being murdered..."

He kept screaming and Li Mubai hugged him closer and closer. The precious sword eventually sank into Huang Jibei's chest. Lean Buddha Amida roared wildly and let go of his two hooked swords.

His blood began to spurt and his body fell backwards. The weapon only needed to slash him once for him to fall to the ground. His limbs were shaken a few times, the thin face had its eyes closed and its mouth wide open. Li Mubai withdrew his blade. He breathed deeply and suddenly felt much better. He went to the forecourt. Hou Liang, the Local Despot, was sitting on the ground and moaning, compressing his wound with both hands. Shunzi knelt down and smacked his forehead to the ground at the sight of Li Mubai.

"Lord Li," he implored, "spare me!"

"Do not be afraid," replied Li Mubai, "I do not kill people lightly. I just killed Huang Jibei, he paid for all his crimes with his life. I will now face the yamen!"

Li Mubai opened the front door without haste. Sword in hand, he then went to the authorities' office to bring himself to justice. He said nothing to the guards other than this:

"My name is Li Mubai, Huang Jibei was my enemy and I just killed him at Shunzi's house. I now wish to constitute myself a prisoner."

The guards knew Li Mubai and they all knew that he was the opponent of Skinny Buddha Amida. He was now appearing in court to accuse himself of the murder of Huang Jibei. It was a disaster! The guards changed color, terrified. They spoke a few words of comfort to him and led him away to shackle him. They then escorted him to the yamen, and sent someone to the scene.

The guards did not know where to turn. The surprising news spread throughout the capital. Few were unaware that early in the morning, at his servant Shunzi's house, residing at Scissor Lane, Fourth Lord Huang had been murdered by Li Mubai. He also told himself that the knight had not fled after killing him, but had surrendered to the authorities. Huang Jibei used to pay out small sums for hypocritical charitable acts. Many residents found that he had had a very tragic end and that Li Mubai had to pay for this crime with his life. But those who had fallen victim to Huang Jibei's traps all knew that he was just a cruel man with a smiling face and they rejoiced at this news by clapping.

Said news reached the ears of Qiu Guangchao who could only sigh with regret. He had been Huang Jibei's friend for many years. But, when the latter had counted on his influence and his wealth to eliminate Li Mubai in order to preserve his fame in the capital against De Xiaofeng, and that he had no qualms about resorting to vile methods to achieve this, their two families had gradually distanced themselves. Their friendship had been permanently broken when he was injured by a dart from Miao Zhenshan. Despite everything, upon learning today of his tragic end, he felt a certain affliction. He then thought of Li Mubai who had surrendered to justice. This young man who excelled in martial arts, this brave man with exemplary courage and righteousness, now risked capital punishment. Qiu Guangchao was really sorry. He jumped in a cart and rushed over to Beile Tie to find a way to save him.

The beile Tie had just heard the news. As soon as he saw Qiu Guangchao, he sighed and declared with his grave and somber face:

"I always knew it would end like this. The means employed by Huang Jibei to oppose De Xiaofeng and Li Mubai were far too treacherous! He was determined to attack their lives. De Xiaofeng could take it, but how could Li Mubai have tolerated being persecuted like this? I suspected that Li Mubai intended to wait until De Xiaofeng's case was settled before correcting Huang Jibei. If he did not escort De Xiaofeng, it is because he could finally take action. After killing Huang Jibei, Li Mubai surrendered himself to the authorities because he was afraid of compromising the De family. He wanted to take on alone what he undertook on his own!"

Qiu Guangchao sighed for a long time.

"I have been friends with Huang Jibei, but I tell myself that he did seek this tragic death. I find it regrettable that Li Mubai is in the hands of the authorities. Second Lord, wouldn't there be a way to save him?"

"This time, I'm afraid not," said the beile, "and I think Li Mubai does not want us to save him. By his death, he undoubtedly wants to show his gratitude to his friend De Xiaofeng!"

The beile Tie thought that this kind of lifelong friendship between

Li Mubai and De Xiaofeng was extremely rare, and he let down a few tears.

"I'll send Delu to scout," he said finally. "We will then calmly think about a solution!"

The two men chatted for a while, then Qiu Guangchao took his leave. The beile Tie sent Delu to see Li Mubai at the yamen prison. In the past, when Fat Lu San and Huang Jibei arrested him, Delu often came to visit him. He never imagined meeting Lord Li again there.

Li Mubai's court appearance had just ended. In court, he clearly admitted having murdered Huang Jibei and claimed that he was solely responsible for this crime. After his confession, he was taken back to his cell. The prison authorities knew he knew the beile Tie, who had come to his aid in the past. This time they didn't risk treating him harshly and placed him in one of the least humid cells.

When Li Mubai sat down on the dilapidated mat on the floor, he thought back to the moment of rapture he had felt that morning at dawn after killing Huang Jibei. He had felt so happy he almost burst out laughing. At that moment, Delu called out to him through the iron bars of the window.

"I'm dispatched by Second Lord Tie!" he said to him.

Li Mubai straightened up and approached. With a pale smile, he replied:

"Go back to him and thank him! Reassure him, tell him not to intervene on my behalf. My reason for being here is different from last time. Last year I was the victim of a conspiracy and unfairly accused. This time I am guilty and I gave myself up on my own initiative. The murder of Huang Jibei must be punished. I will explain that he paid with his life for all his crimes, and it is without the slightest complaint that I will accept the decision of the imperial tribunal and receive the punishment deserved. And even if the Second Lord would grant me again his benevolence to help me, I would disappoint him in his wait because I will never get out of here! Delu, return to the Second Lord. Tell him that I will be

indebted for his immense kindness in another life!"

Li Mubai thought gratefully to Beile Tie for all the favors he had shown him and let out tears. Delu wiped his eyes too, then asked Li Mubai if he needed anything.

"I do not need anything. From now on, don't bother to come visit me anymore!"

Faced with his demeanor so detached, Delu did not try to reason with him. He made several recommendations to the prison guards and returned to report to the Second Lord Tie.

The next day, Delu returned to see him at the same time that a servant of Qiu Guangchao brought him food. According to the guard, Li Mubai had not touched his water or rice the day before. Delu and the servant stood in front of the window and called him several times. Sitting on the mat, he turned his back to them, as if he couldn't hear them, as if he was dead. The two men stood there for a long time worrying. But nothing worked and all they had to do was turn around, reporting to Beile Tie and Qiu Guangchao that the knight had simply ignored them. In fact, before the testimonies of friendship between Beile and Qiu Guangchao, Li Mubai's tears of gratitude flowed endlessly.

Besides hunger and thirst, it was extremely hot in his cell, and the bugs were plentiful. Li Mubai felt completely devastated. At the end of the third day, death hovered over him. His breaths were slower and weaker, but his mind was still alert and aware of the iron bars and the dilapidated mat on the floor. He was smiling proudly and saying to himself: Li Mubai, you are probably a real hero, because even death does not seem to dare to submit. The knight looked around, closed his eyes, and fell into a deep sleep.

He didn't know how long he had fallen asleep when a big hand grabbed and shoved him to wake him up. He jumped up and opened his eyes. In the darkness of the cell, in the midst of the chirping insects, only a few moonbeams penetrated through the window. The man who had just shaken him was kneeling beside him. He hadn't said anything yet as Li Mubai, who was sure he was dealing with Shi the Fat, exclaimed:



"Shi, why did you come? This time, I will really disappoint you in your high hopes. Go quickly. We will be friends in another life!"

"I did not come alone! He replied in his thick voice."

The iron door cracked open and another person entered the cell.

When they passed through the moonlight, Li Mubai found the graceful shadow and felt like it was a woman approaching. He was stunned and leaned on Shi's shoulder to try to get up. He said in a trembling voice:

"Young Yu, you also came! Go quickly! I won't get out of here!"

Xiulian stepped forward, but he couldn't make out her face. However, he could hear her sobs and tears. Full of grief, she replied weakly:

"Big brother Li, come back with us! You are young and excellent in martial arts, how could you resign yourself to dying here?"

Li Mubai sighed briefly and his last tears began to roll down his cheeks. He suddenly felt his arm supported by Xiulian's delicate shoulders.

Shi the Fat straightened him up and wanted to remove Li Mubai's chains. He stepped back and his back hit the stone wall. He was seized with dizziness and fell back. Xiulian rushed to help him and cried softly:

"Brother! Let Shi carry you on your back! If you don't leave here, I won't be leaving either!"

Li Mubai lifted his face and his tears rolled down the young woman's shoulder. In a weak voice, he answered, decided:

"Young girl, you cannot do what you want and you have to watch over the De family. If I killed Huang Jibei, it was not to avenge myself but to allow De Xiaofeng to live in peace in the capital when he returns. I will die without regret! I don't want to intentionally grieve you, but since the tragic death of my brother Meng in Gaoyang, I no longer have a taste for this world. I want to die and

so I will be able to pay back De Xiaofeng for all his benefits. Young Yu, if you find yourself in this miserable situation now, it is all my fault. My conscience will not be at peace until the day of my death. Young girl, go quickly! Go back and take care of the De family!"

Li Mubai's words were like a dagger plunging into Yu Xiulian's chest. Her hands were shaking and she let Li Mubai sit down on the mat again. He lay down and continued with a wave of the hand:

"Lady, big brother Shi, leave quickly!"

At that moment, the vigil bell ringer passed, knocking on his hollow piece of wood. Yu Xiulian and Shi the Fat immediately knelt down and held their breath.

Outside, the bell ringer announced the fourth watch and continued his round. Xiulian then straightened up, but Shi the Fat remained kneeling next to Li Mubai and whispered a few words in his ear:

"If I had known that you would kill Huang Jibei so quickly, I would have come back to the capital faster to complete the task before you. When you were in Xushui Township, you injured Wei Fengxiang, Zhang Yujin, and the tyrant Liu Qi. It didn't matter to me whether Zhang Yujin went there or not, but Liu Qi is my friend. His injury was serious and I couldn't help but take him home for treatment. I was thus delayed for several days. After that, I immediately left for Beijing, with the idea of helping you correct Huang Jibei. Unfortunately, I only arrived in the capital yesterday and Little Scolopendre immediately informed me of all that had passed. I wanted to come and get you out of there right away, but with what happened last year, I was afraid of facing another refusal, so I asked young Yu to come with me today. I was hoping that seeing her face, you would follow us. I never imagined Lord Li's character to be so confusing!

"You will have truly been a hero in vain. In my eyes, there is no such thing as your equal in the Rivers and Lakes. In Shanxi, in my home province, I fought against men who made me bite the dust and I had to flee. I befriended you in the hope that you will one day accompany me to Shanxi and help me take my anger out on them. For a whole year, I went to great lengths for you. I wanted to get

you out of prison, but you refused because you were afraid of compromising your friends. But now, in Beijing, what friend do you have left? Who are you afraid to involve? Lord Li, come with us!"

Shi the Fat didn't care whether Li Mubai agreed or not, and wanted to release his chains. Li Mubai lifted his leg and punched Shi who fell heavily on his buttocks. The resounding noise of the irons startled Xiulian. Shi the Fat, full of rage, dared not linger any longer.

"Let's go!" he said to Xiulian. "Quick! We'll talk about it tomorrow!"

The two immediately passed the cell door again. Shi locked the padlock as before. Shi the Fat, overflowing with anger, and Xiulian, completely dejected, climbed the roofs together, then each slipped away. As they fled, Li Mubai, lying on the mat, had already passed out from grief.

Two days passed, during which beile Tie and Qiu Guang-chao did their best to help Li Mubai. But the facts were far too serious, the testimonies and confessions far too precise. Even when enlisting the help of high-ranking figures, they seemed to have no power for him. Shi the Fat and Yu Xiulian did not resign themselves either, despite Li Mubai's refusal to escape. Each night, they would meet around the yamen and wait for the opportunity to re-enter the prison secretly to force him to flee. Only, the staff of the yamen must have noticed a difference in the lock of the door of his cell because since that first evening, the guards seemed much more vigilant. They kept a close watch on the premises and patrols were much more frequent,

On the evening of the sixth day, Shi the Fat sent Little Scolopendre to deliver a message to Xiulian at the De family residence. He said this:

"Urgent news, tonight we must not go there."

Yu Xiulian was alarmed. The other night, Li Mubai had only one breath of life left. We have already let two days pass, I'm afraid his existence hangs by a thread! Xiulian, observing propriety under all circumstances, usually treated Li Mubai as her benevolent older

brother, and nothing else. Now that he had murdered Huang Jibei and surrendered himself to the authorities in such a grand manner, Xiulian did not understand why she suddenly felt a sense of reverence for him. She was trying to control herself but it was impossible for her to overcome the tenderness she felt for him.

She understood then. Li Mubai was a fiery young man. He admired her but was devastated to learn that she was unfortunately engaged to Meng Sizhao. Her death would solve everything, allowing him to pay De Xiaofeng back, to be forgiven by Meng Sizhao, and also to end his aspirations towards her.

Yu Xiulian, who had always been a determined and cold-hearted young woman, had transformed into a delicate, enthusiastic and passionate person, who cried in secret, especially since she had seen him in prison. Xiulian painfully remembered every detail, the weak and tragic tone of Li Mubai's voice, his magnanimous and heroic words, his brave body that she had supported from her shoulders during her fall and his tears that flowed over them.

Today,

after the second watch, Xiulian donned a short ensemble and armed herself with a small dagger. She took advantage that Dame De had already retired to sleep and that there was no longer any noise in the backyard to cross the wall of the residence. She crossed several alleys and headed for the yamen. She was firmly determined. If she couldn't get Li Mubai out of prison, she would rather die there, nothing to tie her to this pale and painful existence.

She walked for a moment and reached a small hutong. She did not know the name of this alley, but knew that it was close to the yamen. The countless sparkling stars in the sky and the waxing moon seemed to be spying on the young woman with the strange demeanor. Yu Xiulian paused, then, as she was about to leap out of the alley, she felt someone behind her pat her on the shoulder.

"What are you doing?" The person exclaimed.

Xiulian jumped and turned her head. She then saw a man of tall stature. In the moonlight and starlight, she noticed that he wore a

long white beard. He looked like an old man, but she couldn't see his face clearly. She was about to ask him why he had tapped her on the shoulder when he spoke again. He had a southern accent but spoke clearly.

"Go, quickly!" He cried, pushing the young woman.

Xiulian saw that he had surprising strength and was forced to take a few steps back. She recovered and, coming back up, exclaimed:

"Why are you pushing me?"

The man had disappeared without leaving the slightest trace in the blink of an eye, as when he had approached her and she had heard no sound.

Xiulian was surprised and flinched with her whole body. Puzzled, she wondered if it wasn't a ghost. Could that have been my father? she thought. No, my father was not that tall! At the thought, all her amazement vanished to immediately give way to a wave of sadness. She thought back to his tragic death and the marriage he had arranged during his lifetime, and a few tears began to roll down her cheeks. She was desperate but managed to pull herself together and continued to move forward.

She walked quickly, through several small alleys, and finally reached the wall behind the yamen. She was attentive to the slightest noise and remained on her guard. The desire to save Li Mubai made her go for it all. She took advantage of the inattention on the part of the guards to break through the wall and enter the yamen.

It was her father who had given her kung fu to move around in the dark. Since last winter, she had trained hard in Julu and had improved a lot. She hunched over the rooftops, crossed several wide courtyards to finally reach that of the prison. She leaned down from the roof to take a quick glance down and instantly came down to the tiles. In the courtyard, several guards, daggers in their belts, sticks and lanterns in hand, were in the process of circling.

Yu Xiulian lay face down on the roof for over half an hour, keeping

her breath quiet, waiting for the guards to finally leave the yard. Xiulian, more relaxed, found that the guards did not stay patrolling one place indefinitely. They probably only had to do about ten rounds during the night. Xiulian took advantage of the fact that there was no one left in the yard to slowly descend from the roof and walk towards Li Mubai's cell. As she was about to force the lock, she was taken aback and almost uttered a cry. Not only was the padlock no longer on the door, it was also slightly ajar. Without hesitation, she drew her short dagger and entered the cell. The room was in total darkness, no lunar ray penetrated there. Xiulian began to grope around with her hands. She searched right and left, up and down, for a while, but only touched a dingy bowl and a dilapidated mat. There was no longer any trace of Li Mubai.

Her heart suddenly began to beat. She came out of the cell and jumped up onto the roof to reach the wall. As she was about to jump to the ground, two bell-ringers arrived in front of her, striking their hollow wood to announce the vigils. Xiulian lay down on her stomach and the two men walked away. With a bound, she found herself in the street. Her light feet walked quickly and she crossed several alleys along the walls. She came straight back to the residence without even thinking about this strange affair.

When she returned to her room, Lady De was still sleeping soundly, no doubt she had gone to find her husband in the depths of Xinjiang. Xiulian closed the door. She brought up a lamp, lit it, then poured herself a bowl of tea. As she drank, she thought back to the amazing adventure that had just happened to her. She said to herself: Could it be that Li Mubai escaped alone? No, he absolutely refused to leave this cell. So why did he have to hand himself over to the authorities after Huang Jibei's murder? But where could he have gone? What if he was dead and prison staff moved his body? Xiulian suddenly seemed convinced that it was already too late! The heart of the delicate young woman was pierced, her tears began to flow. She sobbed for a long moment and suddenly thought of the old man she had met in the small alley. He could only be a madman. The more she thought about it, the more these events baffled her. That night she slept very badly.

The next day Yu Xiulian reflects all day long on the two incidents of

the day before. Night was falling and Little Scolopendre suddenly presented himself to see her. Xiulian hurried to meet him, she wanted to instruct him to inquire about Li Mubai, in order to know if he had finally escaped or if he was dead.

Little Scolopendre looked terrified and couldn't seem to keep still. He addressed young Yu in a low voice:

"Lord Li ran away from the prison last night. Today, yamen officials searched every nook and cranny inside the nine gates (41). They then learned that Fat Shi was hiding at the Mao Family Inn near the Zhangyi Gate, and sent guards there to have him arrested. But Shi had heard about it and had already run away. Now everyone is aware that it was he who kidnapped Li Mubai because they were both friends. I will no longer be able to stay in the capital, I implore the young lady to pay me a few coins in order to be able to save my skin! Lady, you will have to be very careful over the next few days!"

Young Xiulian looked distraught at these words. She rushed back to her apartments to take a dozen liang, which she then gave to Little Scolopendre. The latter slipped away without delay.

Xiulian then ordered Fuzi to close the front door securely and returned to her room, where she sat down, disoriented. She thought: Could it really be Shi the Fat who kidnapped Li Mubai? I can't believe it, Shi certainly doesn't have the skills. The doubt persisted, but she was reassured to know that Li Mubai had escaped.

The next day, the young Xiulian urged Fuzi and the doormen to keep the large door closed and only open it for the servants attached to the kitchen errands. She feared that Yamen officials would search the residence. She reasoned to herself, thinking that it was not her who had helped Li Mubai to flee and that he was not hiding there. If guards came, what should she be afraid of? Xiulian dreaded their coming all day, but four or five days later, no incident had occurred. With the recommendations that Xiulian made to Fuzi and the other servants, none of them dared to leave the residence, and no one heard of the news that was circulating.

The sixth day had just passed after Li Mubai's escape. Late at night,

on the fourth watch, in the interior apartments of the De family residence, behind the lowered red silk curtain, Lady De was sleeping alone, while Yu Xiulian dozed in the outside room on a wooden bed. The heat was stifling and her sleep was restless. Her dreams were confused and vivid. She dreamed of her father, then of Li Mubai and then woke up with a start. She rolled over in her bed, thinking she could fall asleep again, but her delicate hand suddenly touched something cold, long, like an inert snake. Panicked, she sat down and jumped to the ground. She hurriedly lit the oil lamp which she raised above the bed to take a look. Her face changed expression. What was her surprise when she saw, placed near her pillow, a sparkling blade. Under this precious sword slipped a little red paper note.

She touched nothing and inspected the place from all angles. She didn't notice any movement near the window or against the walls, and wondered who had entered the room and left the sword and the note there beside her. She couldn't stop there. Xiulian then retrieved her swords from the table, left the room, and climbed the rooftops to search all around. Under the moon and the stars, everything was quiet and she heard no bell ringers announce the vigils. It was all very strange. She came down from the roof and returned to her rooms. She took the red paper note and brought it up to the lamp. Fourteen characters were written there in black ink, the size of a walnut. They said this:

"The disciple follows Jiang Nanhe;

The precious sword is bequeathed, predestined for its future."

Xiulian knew all these characters, but their meaning remained obscure to her. She wondered: Who is this Jiang Nanhe? And "the disciple", who is he? The rest of the post - "the precious sword is bequeathed, predestined for its future" - left her completely bewildered and she felt her cheeks flush with redness. Xiulian lifted the precious sword and watched it carefully. It was unmistakably Li Mubai's sword. She wondered: How could this blade have been placed in my room? Would Li Mubai have brought it to me in person? Yet he is not the man to allow himself this kind of freedom!



Xiulian turned and turned the problem in his head without finding a solution. She hid the sword and the red paper note in a secret place, and tirelessly tried to solve the riddle of these fourteen characters. She thought about going in search of a possible lead, but above all had to watch over the De family and never went through the front door. Her days were spent chatting with Lady De and teaching the art of boxing and saber to De Xiaofeng's two young sons.

Lady De was completely unaware of Huang Jibei's murder, let alone the events that followed. Sometimes she worriedly spoke about Li Mubai to Xiulian.

"How come he still hasn't come back since he left so hastily?" she asked.

"He most likely caught up with my older brother De and accompanied him to Xinjiang," young Yu explained to her.

Dame De knew how close of friends the two men were and sincerely believed Xiulian was right.

The days went by like this. More than three months passed and Yang Jiantang, the Divine Lance, finally returned from Xinjiang. He visited Lady De and explained to her that her husband had arrived safely at his destination. Sun Zhengli had remained in Xinjiang and would wait for De Xiaofeng, pardoned, to return to Beijing to escort him again on the way home. Yang Jiantang made every effort to reassure Lady De. He stayed with Qiu Guangchao for a few days, but quickly returned to Yanqing to take care of his agency. Dame De now knew that her husband had arrived safely in Xinjiang, and she was relieved. Li Mubai was nowhere to be found, but she didn't care. As long as young Yu Xiulian stayed by her side, she didn't feel too lonely.

Two summers and two winters followed one another. It was late autumn and De Xiaofeng, the Iron Hand, was pardoned and returned from Xinjiang. Upon his return, he could see that thanks to Xiulian, no trouble had arisen during those two years. He rejoiced and respectfully thanked young Yu. In the presence of his wife, Xiulian then told De Xiaofeng that Li Mubai had killed Huang Jibei

and then delivered himself to justice. While he was letting himself die in prison by refusing to eat, Shi the Fat and herself went to his cell to rescue him but he did not agree to go with them. A few days later, Li Mubai suddenly vanished from the prison. For two years, she had received absolutely no message from him.

De Xiaofeng was both stunned and very worried about the news. Li Mubai had avenged him and magnanimously reported himself to the authorities who had imprisoned him. He felt overwhelmed by grief.

"Are you sure Li Mubai did not die in prison? And that his escape and his flight are not just rumors?"

Xiulian then told him about the discovery of the red note and the precious sword near her pillow, during the sixth night following his disappearance. She took out the two objects and showed them to him. He was just stunned. He took the blade in his hands and watched it carefully.

"Indeed," he nodded. "It is Li Mubai's sword!"

He grabbed the note and began to read it. Immediately, De Xiaofeng burst out laughing. His face bore the marks of the long journey he had just taken, but wore a happy look.

"Do not worry!" he told Xiulian. "Li Mubai followed his uncle by marriage Jiang Nanhe, an old knight errant."

"Jiang Nanhe, an old knight errant?" Xiulian wondered. "What kind of man is he?"

"I never met him, but ten years ago this illustrious knight was famous everywhere. His fame was not limited to Jiangnan, and at all times no one has been able to match him in martial arts. He is Li Mubai's uncle by marriage. When he was a child, Li Mubai lived in Jiangnan. His parents later died and Jiang Nanhe took care of taking him to Nangong for his paternal uncle to educate him. According to Li Mubai, he was only eight years old at the time. It goes without saying that the old knight has never forgotten his nephew. He learned that Li Mubai had ended up in prison and

immediately went to the capital to save him. I think Li Mubai followed his uncle and is currently residing somewhere in Jiangnan. In a few years, he will probably return to Beijing. On that day, I think our Lord Li will have made a lot of progress in martial arts and his character will have changed a lot!"

De Xiaofeng, delighted, was all excited and kept fidgeting. Yu Xiulian now understood the meaning of the phrase, "The disciple follows Jiang Nanhe." She asked, however:

"Since Li Mubai followed his uncle Jiang Nanhe, why didn't he take his precious sword and leave it here for me?"

As she spoke, her cheeks flushed as if she knew very well why Jiang Nanhe had left her the sword and understood very well the meaning of the last sentence, "The precious sword is bequeathed, predestined for its future." But she wanted to hear De Xiaofeng's explanation on this point. He looked embarrassed and gave a half smile.

"That night, the man who brought you the sword was not Li Mubai, it is most certainly Jiang Nanhe. The old knight probably knew that you and Li Mubai are like brothers and sisters, and that you braved the danger to break into the prison to save him. He gave you this sword as a present to thank you! De Xiaofeng's explanation was unconvincing, but Xiulian nodded. She suddenly thought back to her escape attempt to save Li Mubai. She had stopped for a moment in a small alley near the yamen and had met there a strange old man of very tall stature and with a long white beard. He had ordered her inside and pushed her hard. Wasn't that Li Mubai's uncle, that old knight Jiang Nanhe? She was deep in thought.

"Keep this sword very carefully, young lady! It may be ordinary, but Li Mubai used it to crush Wei Fengxiang, The One Who Surpasses Lü Bu, Feng Long, the Little Spear, and Zhang Yujin, the Golden Spear, to kill Huang Jibei, the Lean Buddha Amida, and defeat Feng Mao, the Golden Sabers. It was with it that he made a name for himself, and we can say that it shares his fame with him. As for the note, I would like to take it to the beile Tie for him to have a look at, because I'm sure he hasn't stopped thinking about Li Mubai for the past two years!"

De Xiaofeng then instructed a servant to tell Fuzi to prepare a cart. He went to his rooms to change his outfit and leave without delay. His wife followed him into the bedroom and exclaimed:

"You just arrived. Rest one day. You can wait until tomorrow to go to Second Lord Tie, okay?"

"I don't need to rest," replied De Xiaofeng. "I did just that for over a year in Xinjiang! Especially since, Huang Jibei having been killed by my little brother, I no longer have an enemy. When I want to rest, I will have plenty of time to do it!"

De Xiaofeng sighed as he thought back to what Li Mubai had accomplished for him, who was now in who knows where. His eyes were wet. His wife insisted:

"You have to get a shave, only after will you go to the Second Lord!"

"I don't need to shave," he replied. "I am not on an official mission and if I go to see the Second Lord like this, I think he will recognize me!"

De Xiaofeng noticed that Xiulian was not in her room and retrieved the red paper note, which he waved in front of his wife's eyes while indicating the exit. Laughing softly, he said to her:

"If Jiang Nanhe gave her Li Mubai's precious sword, it's because he has an idea in his head! Didn't you read what there was described on this paper?"

De Xiaofeng pointed to each character of the note for his wife, one after another, and smiled as he read:

"The precious sword is bequeathed, predestined for its future! Ha, Ha, that "predestined" character has so many different meanings, doesn't it?"

De Xiaofeng finally changed. He dressed in luxurious civilian clothes and wore a small black satin cap set with a gem. He took the red paper note with him and left accompanied by Shou'er. The cart took the direction of the Anding gate and went to the young beile Tie.

In the vehicle, De Xiaofeng looked blossoming and beamed with joy, as if he wanted to be noticed by passers-by and thought: Take a look! I, De Xiaofeng, have returned to the capital. I am neither impoverished nor dead but Huang Jibei is, eh? Now even his bones must be reduced to dust! The cart crossed the Beixin Bridge and Fuzi told De Xiaofeng what had happened to him two years before, together with Li Mubai. That evening, he was leading Lord Li. Night was barely falling. When they had crossed this place, they were attacked by a band of ruffians armed with sabers and sticks, but also crossbows, before the authorities intervened. Fortunately, Lord Li had managed to disperse the assailant troop and drive out the official guards. Himself, on the other hand, had been hit in the thigh by an arrow. While still in the Ministry of Punishment prison, De Xiaofeng had indeed known that Li Mubai had fiercely fought against Huang Jibei's men.

The vehicle finally arrived at the beile Tie's residence. De Xiaofeng began by offering his respectful thanks to the beile, then the discussion turned to Li Mubai. De Xiaofeng showed him the note. The beile smiled as he reads it:

"I always knew that Li Mubai had been rescued by someone even more remarkable than him. All the staff at the yamen claim that it was Fat Shi, a small tavern owner, who was behind his escape, but I never believed it. Shi is only a wanderer of Rivers and Lakes without fame, how would Li Mubai have agreed to follow him? This time, I am convinced: Li Mubai most certainly followed his uncle by marriage Jiang Nanhe to the south."

The beile continued with a smile, "You don't know, but the sword Jiang Nanhe gave to Yu Xiulian is from my home. On the second day of Li Mubai's escape, Governor Mao Degun came to visit me. He explained to me that Li Mubai had run away and I asked him why he came to find me. Did he think I had something to do with this case? Mao Degun replied that he wouldn't even dare to think about it, but he knew that I had always looked out for him and that he could not fail to let me know about this story. He also told me that Huang Jibei had done despicable deeds that even his death could not redeem. Li Mubai was now a fugitive criminal, whom he held in high esteem, however.

"I welcomed Mao Degun, and explained to him that I had indeed become acquainted with Li Mubai. I then asked him to exchange the sword with which Li had killed Huang Jibei, to keep it as a memento. That same day, Governor Mao had the precious sword brought to me. I had placed it on the long, narrow table in my library and thought I would find a sheath for it. I would have returned it to Li Mubai when he returned to the capital. Who would have thought that within three days of retrieving it, when I had yet to find a scabbard for it, the precious sword would vanish. I was of course very surprised. But after Li Mubai's escape, the atmosphere was very tense, and I found it unbecoming to send my men all over the place in search of a sword. Ha ha! I never imagined that it was Jiang Nanhe who picked it up and gave it to young Yu Xiulian, as a marriage-sealing present for his nephew!"

De Xiaofeng listened to him with a smile, then added:

"When Li Mubai was still in prison, young Yu Xiulian also tried to save him. He refused to run away with her, but I am sure that in the semi-darkness of the cell, these two will have made a lot of secrets. Li Mubai has always had a rather confusing character, he never listened to the advice of others. But if his uncle by marriage Jiang Nanhe was firm with him, I think he did not dare to oppose him. With this sentence: "the precious sword is bequeathed, predestined for its future", he clearly shows that he wishes to become the go-between for a beautiful event later on."

"For now, young Yu Xiulian is staying with you, said the beile, and you absolutely have to keep her there. If she starts to want to wander through the Jianghu again, then even Jiang Nanhe will no longer have the means to find her!"

"I know how to go about it so that she does not leave!" De Xiaofeng replied.

The beile Tie again recommended to De Xiaofeng:

"Huang Jibei is no longer here to set traps for you, but you will have to be careful, because the case in which you were involved is still not settled. The treasures stolen from the Palace were very numerous and only a few hundred pearls were found. Yang Junru

only had a dozen in his rather small shop. It seems that there are still more than forty natural pearls, large and extremely rare in this world, which would remain untraceable. Now that you're back, you're going to have to keep a low profile, because I'm afraid this old business will resurface!"

De Xiaofeng agreed. The two men chatted for a while, then De Xiaofeng took his leave. He then went to Beigouyan, to the residence of the Marquis Qiu. He thanked Qiu Guangchao very much and together they brought up the case of Li Mubai and Jiang Nanhe, then De Xiaofeng went home. That day, the whole household was in turmoil. De Xiaofeng told Xiulian of his journey to the garrison where he had been banished. He told her about all the famous sites he had passed through, all the brave men he had met, and all the strange stories he had been told. He was inexhaustible. He conversed with young Yu until nine in the evening, then retired to his library for the night.

The next day, the main door of the residence remained closed and visitors were turned away. Now, apart from frequent visits from Beile Tie, Qiu Guangchao and Sun Zhengli who was now part of the Taixing agency escort guards, De Xiaofeng no longer received anyone. He would stay at home all day, spending his time practicing calligraphy and reading the Annals. In the alley where he was staying, he bought another small home for young Yu Xiulian. She could continue to teach martial arts to the two young De Lords, at the same time allowing De Xiaofeng to protect his family against possible enemies.

Young Yu Xiulian was spending peaceful days at home, where two attendants were at her service. Every day, apart from the lessons she gave to De Xiaofeng's two sons, she also trained in kung fu, which she did not want to neglect in any way. It happened that Lady De invited her to chat. This life which was simply passing by did not affect Xiulian in any way. However, it sometimes happened that while inspecting her belongings, Xiulian saw Li Mubai's shining sword or the shiny gold hairpin, Meng Sizhao's wedding present. Tender feelings then resurfaced, mixed with regrets, and, out of sight, the young woman let her tears flow.

# List of characters

## PROVINCE OF ZHILI (HEBEI)

### JULU DISTRICT

#### *Xiongyuan escort agency*

- Yu Xiongyuan, old escort guard, "The Iron Winged Eagle" or "Old Eagle";
- Lady Yu, née Liu, wife of Yu Xiongyuan;
- Yu Xiulian, daughter of Yu Xiongyuan;
- Sun Zhengli, disciple of Yu Xiongyuan, "The Eagle of the Five Talons";
- Cui San, "the Cunning of the Underground".

#### *Other characters*

- The boss Xu of the grain shop in the district of Taidehe;
- Employee He at the Taidehe grain store.

### NANGONG DISTRICT

- Li Mubai;
- Li Fengqing, uncle of Li Mubai;
- Ji Guangjie, teacher of Li Mubai;
- Liang Wenjin, young lord, disciple of Ji Guangjie;
- Mou Zichun, maternal uncle of Liang Wenjin;
- Xi Zhongxiao, young lord, disciple of Ji Guangjie.

### RAOYANG DISTRICT

- Magistrate Tang.

### GOVERNMENT OF XUANHUA



### *Yongxiang escort agency*

- Meng Yongxiang, "The Bear of Koubei";
- Meng Sichang, eldest son of Meng Yongxiang;
- Meng Sizhao, second son of Meng Yongxiang, Xiulian's fiancé;
- Liu Qing, escort guard, "Buddha's Little Warrior";
- Tang Zhenfei, escort guard;
- Xu Yuting, escort guard.

### YANQING

#### *Quanxing escort agency*

- Yang Jiantang, Yang the third lord, the "Divine Lance";
- Sun Qi, escort guard, "Iron Head";
- Liu Wu, escort guard, "The one who surpasses Wukong".

### JUYONG'S PAST

- Wei Fengxiang, former escort guard of the capital, leader of the brigands, "He who surpasses Lü Bu".

### GOVERNMENT OF BAODING

- Tao Hong, rich lord, disciple of Feng Mao, boss of the Guangtai escort agency, "the Black Tiger";
- Zhang Er, the local controller Zhang.

### PREFECTURE OF ZHUO

- Liu Qi, little local tyrant.

### PROVINCE OF HENAN

### ZHANGDE DISTRICT

- Yu Tianjie, disciple of one of Yu Xiongyuan's brothers in arms, "Golden Darts".

## WEIHUI GOVERNMENT

### *Around He Feilong*

- He Feilong, youthful friend of Yu Xiongyuan, former escort guard of the capital, He with the "Precious Saber", also called He Wenliang;
- He Sanhu, son of He Feilong, "Iron Pagoda"
- He Qihu, son of He Feilong, "Phantom with the purple face";
- He Jian'e, daughter of He Feilong, "the Demoness";
- Zhang Yujin, husband of He Jian'e, "Golden Lance";
- Zeng Debao, disciple of He Feilong;

## ZHUMADIAN

- Miao Zhenshan, "the Fish that swallows up the Boats".
- Pang Qi, one of his men, "Au Regard Foudroyant".

## JIANGNAN

- Li Fengjie, father of Li Mubai;
- Jiang Nanhe, Southern Crane, knight errant and sworn brother of Li Fengjie, uncle by marriage of Li Mubai.

## BELJING

- Qi Dianchen, uncle of Li Mubai, civil servant at the Ministry of Punishments;
- Lady Yang, wife of Qi Dianchen;
- Laisheng, servant of Qi Dianchen;
- Fat Shi, the boss Shi of the small tavern in the Prime Minister's lane;
- His employee;
- Qiu Guangchao, the young Marquis Qiu, "the General with

the Silver Lance";

- Qiu Lide, the Marquis Qiu, father of Qiu Guangchao;
- Qin Zhenyuan, master of the young Marquis Qiu;
- Tie Shanhong, the young beile Tie, the second lord Tie, "Little Mustaches";
- Delu, servant of the young beile Tie;
- In Bao, "Enzi the Iron Leg";
- Guang Yuan, Patriarch of Faming Temple;
- Tongzhi, his disciple.

### *Around De Xiaofeng*

- De Xiaofeng, De the fifth lord, works in the inner courtyard, "Iron Hand";
- His wife ;
- His mother ;
- Shou er, his servant;
- Fuzi, his driver;
- Yang Junru, an acquaintance;
- Meixi, prostitute of the House of Scented Clouds;
- Xiaoxian, prostitute of the House of Scented Clouds;
- Tong San, small official of the Treasury Store.

### *Around Huang Jibei*

- Huang Jibei, Huang the fourth lord, merchant, "the Lean Buddha Amida";
- Hao San, the steward of Huang Jibei, "Beef Head";
- Shunzi, young servant of Huang Jibei;
- Liu-the-Ninth, in the service of Huang Jibei, "Spotted Falcon";
- Jiang-le-Troisième, in the service of Huang Jibei, "Nape of Iron";
- Zhang-the-Sixth, in the service of Huang Jibei;
- Hou Liang, in the service of Huang Jibei, the "Local Despot";
- Jia Qiu, in the service of Huang Jibei, "Sharp Stick".

### *Around Lu San*

- Lord Lu San, Gros Lu San, trader, manager of several banks;
- Ya'e, Lu San's concubine;
- Xu the former assistant minister at the Ministry of Ceremonies, His Excellency Xu;
- Wang'er, servant of Xu the assistant minister;
- Imperial Censor Liu;
- Imperial Censor Pang;
- Ma, member of the Imperial Academy;
- Yang'er, the steward of Duke Qi's residence;
- Jiao Wu, the steward of one of the princely houses;
- His Excellency Mao the Governor;
- Hu Qitu, head of the Department of Punishments.

### *Around Xianniang*

- Xie Cuixian, Xianniang, the "knight courtesan", House of Sumptuous Treasures;
- Lady Xie, his mother;
- Xie Qi, his father;
- Aunt Jin.

### *Around Feng Mao*

#### The Five Tigers Feng:

- The eldest of the Five Tigers is deceased;
- Feng De, the "Silver Horse";
- Feng Huai, the "Iron Staff";
- Feng Mao, the "Golden Sabers";
- Feng Long, the "Little Lance", Chunyuan escort agency;
- Liu Qiyun, Taixing escort agency;
- Chang Poyu, Gongshun escort agency;
- Zhao Lishan, Taiping escort agency;
- Liu Qixi, Sihai escort agency;
- Mao Baokun, Sihai escort agency.

## OTHER CHARACTERS

- Li Fengjie, father of Li Mubai;
- Jiang Nanhe, Southern Crane, sworn brother of Li Fengjie.
- In Bao, Enzi, "the Iron Leg";
- His Excellency Mao, Governor Mao Degun;
- Eunuch Zhang, high steward at the Imperial Palace;
- Wu Da, "the Little Scolopendre".

## Footnotes (Chapters 1-17)

1 Li: measure about 500 meters. (All notes are by the translator.)

2 Kingdoms of Yan and Zhao, two kingdoms of the Zhou dynasty (XI-256 (222) BC) mainly known during the “Warring States” period (453-221 BC).

3 Beijing, Beijing, literally the “Capital of the North”. Beijing was the capital under several dynasties (Yuan, Ming, Qing). First chosen by Yan State during the "Spring and Autumn" and "Warring States" periods, it became the secondary capital called Yanjing under the Liao Dynasty. It remained capital during the Jin, Yuan, Ming, Qing dynasties, and until the beginning of the Republic of China, using successively the names of Zhongdu, Dadu, Beiping and Beijing.

4 Martial arts, or wushu: term used to designate all the individual fighting techniques. It brings together techniques with or without weapons. Outside of China, we prefer the generic name of gongfu or kung fu.

5 The story takes place at the end of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), following on from the first two volumes.

6 In China, the proper name always precedes the first name. In the Chinese tradition, a life cycle corresponds to sixty years. Reaching this age means entering old age, a respectable state in Confucius. Yu Xiongyuan has passed this cycle, he is actually in his sixties.

7 “At the end of the period of turmoil in the Qing Dynasty, many vagrant bandits took refuge in the surrounding countryside, where they robbed itinerant merchants and travelers. Those who did not practice martial arts therefore had to afford the protection of bodyguards, otherwise the slightest movement would be impossible. As a result, armed escort agencies were popping up everywhere and martial arts students were growing in number every day. »First volume of Wang Dulu's pentalogy, translation by Solange Cruveillé, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 2007.

8 Jianghu: literally “Rivers and Lakes”. World of outlaws, fugitives,

artists and itinerant merchants, vagrants and robbers. This is where you also meet great heroes, valiant knights, righters of wrongs.

9 In ancient China, married women kept their father's surname. For the convenience of the story, "Lady Liu" the wife of Yu Xiongyuan, will be called "Lady Yu".

10 Literally xiu means "beautiful, pretty, graceful, elegant" and lion means "lotus".

11 Small feet were a sign of beauty.

12 Kung fu, a term designating a whole set of combat techniques with or without weapons.

13 This is an administrative division in ancient China. The provinces were divided in order of importance: into governments (or prefectures), prefectures (or sub-prefectures), and districts.

14 One might think that their surname Yu is the same; they are both transcribed in pinyin by Yu, but they are actually two separate sinograms.

15 Qingmingjie, the feast of the dead. In the third lunar month (early April) families go to the graves of deceased relatives to honor the ancestors (cleaning the graves).

16 In China, we do not use the terms "sir" or "madam", we prefer to use the terms "uncle" and "aunt" to address people older than oneself, whether or not they belong to the family. In addition, we like to precede nouns with adjectives such as lao, "old", da, "fat", xiao, "small".

17 Most common posture in China during rituals, or in the presence of a personality to greet her (formerly the emperor).

18 Literally "He the Dragon in Flight".

19 A liang (approximately thirty-six grams) is often translated as "tael" or "ounce". In 1820, a silver liang was worth about a thousand pieces of copper (sapèque); in 1845, it was worth two thousand two hundred or more.

20 He Sanhu, literally He the Third Tiger.

21 He Qihu, literally He the Seventh Tiger.

22 He Jiane, literally He Sword Beauty.

23 This is Chinese boxing, using fists and feet.

24 Traditional houses are made up of several wings (north, south, east, west), arranged around several courtyards. The exterior or secondary courtyard is located near the entrance and is used to welcome visitors. The main or interior courtyard is reserved for the family, you usually have to go through several doors to access it.

25 Kang: traditional Chinese brick bed, covered with a mat, through which the stove pipe passes to heat it. Several people could be seated there. This type of bed is characteristic of North China.

26 Amida Buddha is one of the most popular Buddha in the Mahayana. While a bodhisattva, he made forty-eight solemn vows, pledged to help all suffering beings.

27 Miao Zhenshan, literally Miao “who shakes the mountains”; his nickname suggests he can swim very well.

28 The night was once divided into five watches (geng) of two hours each, so the first began around seven o'clock. It is therefore around eleven o'clock.

29 Xiucai: Graduated from the first degree of official examinations under the Ming and Qing.

30 Yaksha: evil demon in Buddhist mythology.

31 Jiangnan: the regions south of Changjiang (the Yangtze, the Blue River).

32 Heroes of the two previous volumes. Called in his youth Petite Grue, then Grue du Sud.

33 Mu: unit of area. One mu is equal to 1/15 of a hectare.



34 Jinshi: candidate who successfully passes the highest level of the imperial exams.

35 These two young women embody beauty. Xishi, or Xizi, lived in the 5th century BC and is renowned for its great beauty. Chang'e or Heng'e is according to legend the goddess of the moon. After stealing the elixir of long life from her husband, she took refuge on the moon and became immortal.

36 Department of Punishments, which is part of the Six Ministries (or Departments) of the Capital. These ministries were a legacy of the Tang Dynasty and covered the areas of Personnel, Revenue, Ceremonies (or Rites), War, Punishments and Public Works. Each in the provinces had similar divisions within their jurisdiction (yamen).

37 Liu Bei (161-223) founder of the Han kingdom, Three Kingdoms period. Liu Bei went to the cottage where Zhuge Liang lived as a hermit three times to beg him to become his military adviser. He accepted and became a legendary strategist.

38 The Spring Festivals: New Year and Qingming.

39 Changchun, literally "the Long Spring".

40 Hutong: alley.

41 Bagu: eight-part essay required for imperial exams.

42 The Chinese Almanac is based on a long observation of the movement of the stars and natural rhythms, and indicates the good days and the bad days for work in the fields and the activities of human life.

43 The saber is curved in shape while the sword is straight, wide and double-edged.

44 Damochang, literally "the burnishing factory".

45 The yamen: seat of the imperial administration which includes among others the local court, administrative buildings, the magistrate's residence, official rooms (reception, ceremonial),

treasury stores, as well as the prison.

46 Shanyu: Shanxi and Henan. The Two Huai (Lianghuai): the northern and southern parts of the Huai River which crosses the provinces of Henan and Anhui.

47 Fumuguan: "the official father and mother", a popular term for magistrates.

48 Guandi, the god of war, or Guan Yu (160-216), Chinese general at the end of the Han dynasty (206 BC - 220 AD). He was one of the heroes of The History of the Three Kingdoms and was Liu Bei's ally. Considered one of the most famous Chinese military heroes, he was deified after his death under the name of Guandi. He is still honored today in China, both by Taoists and Buddhists. Symbol of loyalty and righteousness.

49 Feng shui: ancient Chinese art whose goal is to harmonize the energy of a place so as to promote the health, well-being and prosperity of its occupants. For centuries, the Chinese have used it to design cities, build their homes and bury their dead.

50 Koubei is the region north of Zhangjiakou, north of Hebei and central Inner Mongolia; also called Kouwai. In Chinese, the term which means "bear" and is pronounced xiong. The term "hero" is also pronounced similarly, hence the pun.

51 The guardians of Buddha with the diamond pestle, protective warriors of Buddhism (jingang, diamond). They appeared as warriors with grimacing, fierce faces, huge muscles, armed with mallets made of magical diamonds. There are statues bearing their likeness on either side of the entrance doors to Buddhist temples. This nickname can mean that the man is tall and well built.

52 The Huang He, the Yellow River, the second longest river in China after the Chang Jiang (Yangtze or Blue River). This winding river makes a large meander in the shape of an "S".

53 Third watch: around eleven o'clock.

54 Fourth watch: around one o'clock.

55 Fifth watch: around three o'clock.

56 The Juyong Pass (Juyongguan), located northwest of Beijing, is a historic pass. At the beginning of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) a wall six thousand three hundred kilometers long was erected in northern China (its construction had started in the third century BC, but its current layout dates from the Ming period). It was divided into nine zones, each with its own fortress, watchtowers and strategic passes. The most famous are Shanghaiguan at the eastern end of the wall, Jiayuguan in the west, and Juyongguan some sixty kilometers north of Beijing. Juyongguan was a strategic passage that linked Beijing to Inner Mongolia, long before the Ming dynasty.

57 "Juyong die cui": these four characters are attributed to Emperor Qianlong (1736-1796).

58 Yanjing: one of the ancient names of Beijing.

59 Yanqing: city and region northwest of Beijing.

60 Wei Fengxiang, literally "Wei the Spinning Phoenix".

Lü Bu was a famous military officer at the end of the Han Dynasty. A character popularized in the 14th century by Luo Guanzhong's novel *The History of the Three Kingdoms*, he is represented there as an invincible warrior, master of the halberd and Tare, riding the Red Hare horse capable of traversing a thousand lilies in one day. He is also portrayed as an arrogant, deceitful and easy-to-handle person.

61 Zhangjiakou: city in the northwest of Hebei province.

62 Guihua: name under the Ming dynasty of Hohhot or Houhehot, current capital of the autonomous region of Inner Mongolia, province of China.

63 Zhao Zilong or Zhao Yun (168-229), general of the end of the Han dynasty and the beginning of the Three Kingdoms period. Liu Bei often praises his incredible bravery. His spear is called the Ferocious Dragon. He also became a famous character in the novel *The Story of the Three Kingdoms* by Luo Guanzhong.

64 Wukong refers to Sun Wukong, the monkey with supernatural powers, the main character of the famous Xiyouji novel, The Journey to the West.

65 Mantou: steamed bun.

66 The White Banner (Zhengbai qi). The Qing dynasty was not of Chinese origin but of Manchu origin. The Manchurian nobles were called "banner men", in reference to the Eight Banners. When the Qing captured Beijing in 1644, all Chinese and merchant families who were not on the banner records were moved to the South City (the Outer City), while the North City (the Inner City or Tartar City) was divided into eight residential sectors according to the Eight Banners, designated by their colors: yellow, red, bordered in red, bordered in blue, for the western town, and bordered in yellow, white, bordered in white, blue, for the city is.

67 The inner court held supremacy over the outer court, made up of the heads of the Grand Secretariat and the Six Ministries.

68 Qigong: energetic exercises, based on movements accompanied by controlled breathing; practices intended to control, regulate, direct the flow of intangible energy circulating in the human body.

69 Pailou: traditional buildings in Chinese cities, triumphal arches adorning certain streets (leading in particular to temples) or simple porticoes placed at the entrance to shops.

70 Beile: third in the hierarchy of princes of the Manchu aristocracy. The highest rank corresponded to the princes of blood, then came that of the second rank princes, then the beiles, the beizi... there were fourteen degrees in all.

71 The Desheng (Deshengmen) gate, north of the city. One of the last gates of Beijing still visible today (there is in fact only its "tower of arrows"). All the gates of the city consisted of a tower (chenglou) which was doubled by another imposing tower pierced with loopholes, called the "tower of arrows" (jianlou). These two towers were connected by a circular enclosure (wengcheng), a sort of barbican.

72 Officially called Xuanwumen.

73 Yangshi: "lady Yang". In ancient China, shi was the name for married women, appended to their father's surname.

74 The ink is dry. It looks like a kind of stick that you rub with water on an ink stone to dilute it.

75 Er huang: one of the two most common styles of traditional Chinese operas.

76 Parallel Sentences (duilian): paired sentences of equal but variable length that the Chinese generally calligraphy on rolls of paper, strips of fabric, sometimes even wooden planks. The sentences are often poetic, the two scrolls are presented side by side, and most often hung on the doorposts.

77 Meixi: first name composed of mei, literally "to court, flatter", and xi "pleasant, adorable".

78 There are said to have been more than fifty pailou in Beijing. Among the best known were the pailou of Dongdan and Xidan, those of Dongsi and Xisi, and that of Qianmen. Almost all the pailou in the capital have been demolished or dismantled.

79 Xishi embodies beauty.

80 Shitouren: expression designating a muzzle without tact, but this is a play on words, because shitou means "stone" and ren "man" (the stone man), hence: I had to break.

81 Zhengyanglou: one of the eight most famous restaurants in the capital, founded during the Qing dynasty.

82 Hanjiatan alley, Stone hutong, Baishun hutong are among the eight alleyways (bada hutong) of the capital known for their famous houses. They are all located near the Pearl Market Street (Zhushikoujie).

83 Cuixian, literally cui, means "green or jade"; xian means "fine, delicate, tapering".

84 Each of the sentences begins in Chinese with the two characters of the name Cuixian.

85 Jiangsu Province.

86 Bai Letian, also known as Bai Juyi (772-846), renowned poet of the Tang Dynasty.

87 Liulichang: “Glazed Brick Factory” street, southwest of the city. Under the Qing dynasty, it included bookstores, printing shops and shops selling the supplies needed by scholars (paper, brush, ink and ink stone).

88 Five-color tableware style (blue, yellow, red, white, black) fashionable during the reign of Emperor Kangxi (1662-1723).

89 Zhongjiujie: The Mid-Autumn Festival or the Moon Festival takes place on the fifteenth day of the ninth lunar month. It takes place in honor of the Moon, on a full moon night; but it is also the feast of the god of the soil (the work of the year is coming to an end and we are only waiting for the last harvest). Even today this feast represents the reunion, the coming together. It is characterized by the sharing of moon cakes (yuebing).

90 Also called Chaoyangmen.

91 Poyang Lake, Jiangxi Province.

92 Longjing tea: green tea, literally “Dragon well”, easily recognizable by its flat green leaves.

93 Brothels were marked with red lanterns.

94 Chi: unit of length, equivalent to a third of a meter.

95 Zhang: unit of length, equivalent to three meters. One zhang is equivalent to ten chi.

96 Huaqiang is a weapon similar to a short lance or a short pike, a kind of esparto lined with a blade.

97 Dongling: city in northeast China, Liaoning province.

98 Bagua quan, literally the “fist of the eight trigrams”. Boxing system classified in the internal current (neijia). Created by Dong Haichuan (1796-1880), this boxing consists of a succession of hand movements, the practitioner moving around the circumference of an imaginary circle. This boxing has only eight fundamental hand movements corresponding to the eight trigrams of Yijing (Book of Changes, book of divination and thought). Each of the eight movements can be combined with one of the other seven, thus obtaining 64 transformations inspired by the 64 transformations of the eight trigrams (bagua).

99 Jin: unit of weight. One jin equals half a kilogram.

100 The proverb goes: "As long as you don't fight, you don't know each other. "

101 Shifu: respectful name used in particular to address a monk.

102 Junzi: we can translate this word by "the good man", equivalent in China of a saint, of an honest man, of a master, of a morally respectable scholar...

103 Yaozi fanshen: rapid movement to martial arts, literally “the Hawk's turn”.

104 Lord Xu wants to insinuate that for such a tiny change (shaving a beard) the censor may find it fishy and stop it for so little.

105 According to legends, there is a rabbit, a goddess, a toad on the moon... Here, Jiao Wu somehow implies that his future wife has a lover.

106 Sister-in-law: here, a term used for the wife of an older brother or friend.

107 Senior officer in charge of civil administration and the army at the provincial level.

108 Pudao: baudelaire or badelaire; a sort of saber, the blade of which is short, wide and curved at the tip.

109 Qing: unit of area. One qing is equivalent to 100 mu which is

equivalent to 6.667 hectares.

110 Kaifeng, Henan City.

111 Rehe: old name of the city of Chengde, northeast of Beijing.

112 Tieshazhang, literally the "palm in iron filings", combat technique using the hands, Chinese version of karate. Tieshazhan or tieshashou, in fact designates in Chinese boxing the bare hand of a formidable expert, capable of extraordinary feats, such as breaking the hardest materials. Zhang literally means "palm, to strike someone with the hand," hence De Xiaofeng's nickname: Tiezhang, the Iron Hand.

113 De Xiaofeng's wife is confused about the names of her friends. She gives in particular the name of Huang-the-Sixth, huangliu in Chinese, which also means "to be a notorious liar".

114 The Shenwu Gate was once the most important of the four gates leading to the Imperial Palace or "Forbidden City". The other three were Donghua Gate, Xihua Gate, and Wumen Gate.

115 Sanjiegun: a sort of nunchaku in three parts joined by chains.

116 Screen wall (yingbi): after the front door, a wall preventing prying eyes from seeing inside the houses. Also called the Spirit Wall because it is also intended to prevent evil spirits and harmful influences from entering homes.

117 Well-done, chewy meat noodles (lanroumian), was an inexpensive dish, only served in tea houses.

118 A colorful expression which means: wait for two opponents to kill each other to take advantage of it.

119 Expression meaning that late relief cannot satisfy an urgent need.



## Footnotes (Chapters 18-34)

1 The yamen: seat of the imperial administration which includes among others the local court, administrative buildings, the magistrate's residence, official rooms (reception, ceremonial), treasury stores, as well as the prison. (All notes are by the translator.)

2 Beile: third rank in the hierarchy of princes of the Manchu aristocracy.

3 Emitufo: Buddhist acclamation, “may Buddha protect you”.

4 Liang: monetary unit, equivalent to an ounce of silver, often translated as tael.

5 Jianghu: literally “Rivers and Lakes”. World of outlaws, fugitives, artists and itinerant merchants, vagrants and robbers. It is there that one also meets the great heroes, the valiant knights, the righters of wrongs.

6 Kang: traditional Chinese brick bed, covered with a mat, through which the stove pipe passes to heat it. Several people could be seated there. This type of bed is characteristic of northern China.

7 Beijing was divided into two cities: an interior city in the north, almost square, surrounded by a rampart of about twenty kilometers pierced by nine gates. This northern part was as if embedded in the southern part, which constituted the outer city. The southern city marked the lower limit of the city and was protected by a rampart of about fifteen kilometers comprising seven gates.

8 Martial arts, or wushu: term used to designate all the individual combat techniques. It brings together techniques with or without weapons. Outside of China, we prefer the generic name of gongfu, or kung fu.

9 Jiangnan: regions located south of Changjiang (the Yangtze, the Blue River).

10 This is Chinese boxing, using fists and feet. Martial arts are not limited to unarmed combat readiness exercises and include the study of weapon handling (bingqi). There is an impressive amount of them, but we generally talk about eighteen categories of so-called traditional or classic weapons. We can try to classify them into five basic weapons: the spear (qiang, mao), the straight double-edged sword (jian), the staff (gun, bang), the saber (dao), the halberd.

11 Han Dynasty (206 BC -220).

12 If someone was charged, their relatives were also concerned.

13 Yanqing: city northwest of Beijing.

14 Zhangjiakou: city in the northwest of Hebei province.

15 Kouwai: region located north of Zhangjiakou, north of Hebei and central Inner Mongolia. Also called Koubai.

16 Hutong: alley.

17 Rehe: former name of the city of Chengde, northeast of Beijing.

18 Juyong Pass (Juyongguan), located northwest of Beijing.

19 Zhangyi Gate: officially called Guang'anmen.

20 Dame Xie and Xianniang, like Li Mubai, reside in the southern part of Beijing, the outer city (or "Chinese city"). To get to the inner city (or "Tartar city"), one had to go through the Qianmen, Shunzi or Chongwen gates, heading north.

21 The Shawo Gate: officially called Guangqumen.

22 Shaozigun: two-part plague. The flail, derived from the agricultural tool used to thresh grain, is a weapon made up of two or three sections of varying length, linked together by a chain. In Japan, the short two-segment version is known as nunchaku.

23 Su Qin (? - 284 BC) was a fine and renowned strategist of the Warring States period who had a difficult start.

24 Chi: unit of length, equivalent to a third of a meter.

25 Shunzi Gate: officially named Xuanwumen.

26 Xinjiang: arid region in northwest China, on the old Silk Road, more than two thousand kilometers from Beijing.

27 Dongling: District northeast of Beijing, Liaoning province.

28 Xiling: district south of Beijing, Hebei province.

29 Zhili: old name of Hebei province.

30 Tong Pass: famous passage located in Shaanxi. A communication route coming from Shanxi and another from Henan joined at this pass and then continued in the direction of Xi'an.

31 Xi'an: capital of Shaanxi province.

32 Taiyuan: capital of Shanxi province.

33 Mount Hua (Huashan), located in Shaanxi, is one of the five sacred mountains of China.

34 Qilian Mountains (Qilianshan): mountain range located in Gansu province and northeast of Qinghai province.

35 The Yumen pass (Yumenguan): famous gate located on an important communication axis of Gansu. It overlooked the western regions.

36 Seven copper pellets were sometimes embedded in the blade of civil swords (wenjian) and represented the constellation Ursa Major. These inlays were united by a line engraved in the metal and were intended to circulate energy (qi).

37 Changjiang, literally the "long river". The most important river in China, also called the Yang-tse-Kiang or the Blue River.

38 Jin: unit of mass measurement, equivalent to half a kilogram.

39 These last lines refer to the title of the work, in Chinese Baojian

Jinchai, literally, The Precious Sword and the Golden Hairpin. The sword symbolizes Li Mubai and the gold hairpin, Yu Xiulian.

40 The Shuihuzhuan is one of the most popular river novels in China, a masterpiece written around the 14th century. It tells the story of a band of insurgents, at odds with justice and the authorities, followers of martial arts, who wander among the Rivers and Lakes and will end up taking refuge in the "swamps of the Liang Mountains". Lin Chong is one of the main protagonists among the one hundred and eight brigands of the Liang Mountains landmark. This work was translated by Jacques Dars under the title *Au bord de l'eau*.

41 This is the inner city.